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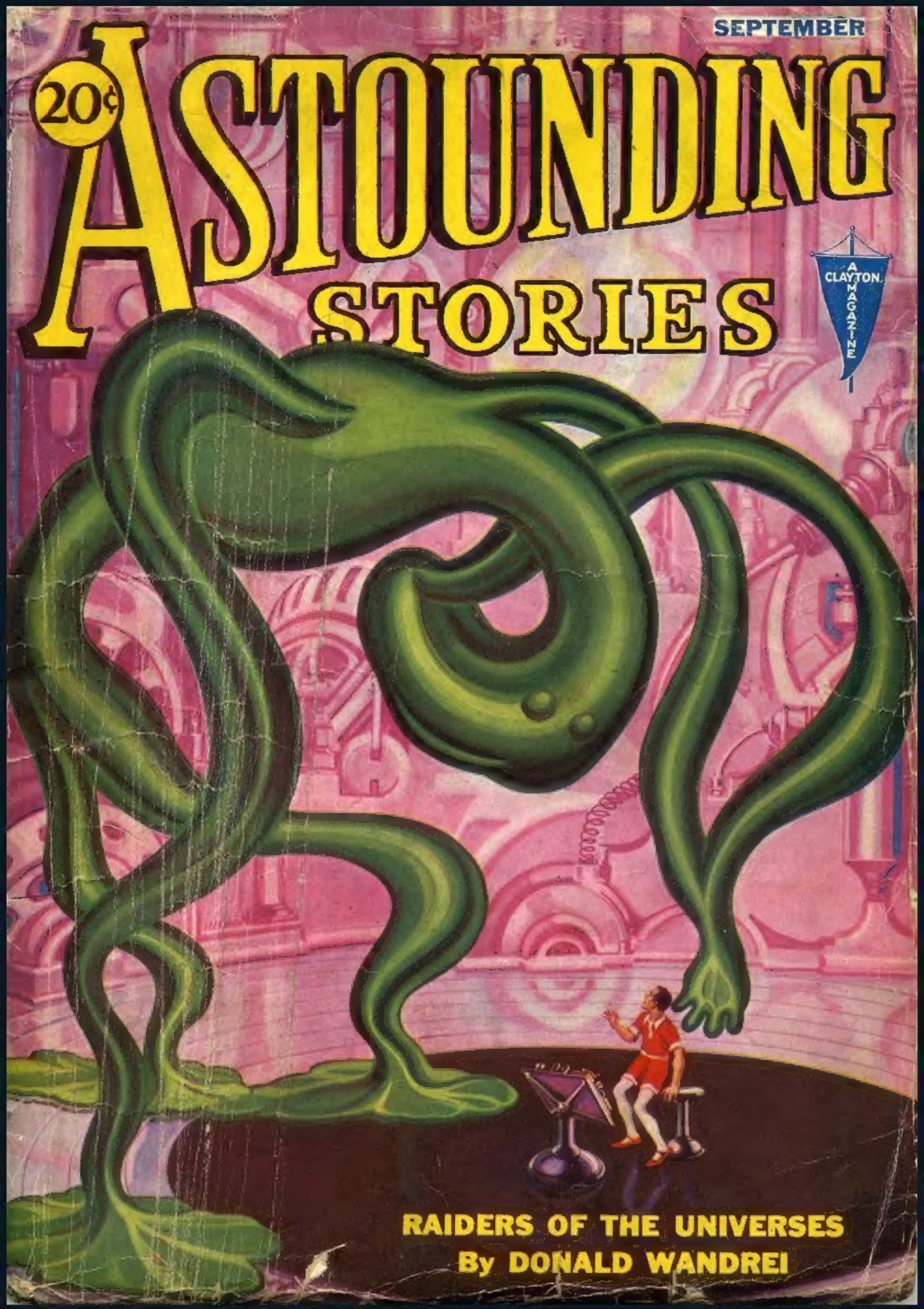

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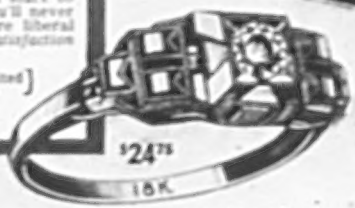

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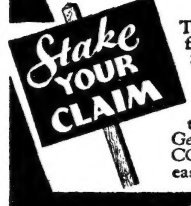

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Loot of the Void

By Edwin K. Sloat

DICK PENRUN glanced up incredulously.

"Why, that's impossible; you would have to be two hundred years old!" he exclaimed.

Lozzo nervously ran a hand through his white mop of hair.

"But it is true, Sirro," he assured his companion. "We Martians sometimes live three centuries. You should know that. I am only a hundred and seventy-five, and I do not lie when I say I was a cabin boy under Captain Halkon."

His voice sank to a whisper, and he glanced apprehensively about the buffet of the *Western Star* which was due now in three days at the Martian

Into the Trap-Door City of great spiders goes Penrun after the hidden plunder of the space-pirate Halkon.

Down from the pinnacle of rock streaked a gigantic spider.

city of Nurm. Penrun's eyes followed his anxious glances curiously. The buffet was partly filled with passengers, smoking, gossiping women, and men at cards, or throwing dice in the Martian gambling game of *diklo*, which was the universal fad of the moment. No place could have been safer, Penrun reflected. Doubtless the old man's caution was a lifelong habit acquired in his youth, if he had actually served under Halkon.

Before long the old codger would be saying that he knew the hiding place of Halkon's treasure, about which there were probably more legends and yarns than anything else in the Universe. A century had elapsed since the death of the famous pirate who had preyed on the shipping of the Void with fearless, ruthless audacity and had piled up a fabulous treasure before that fatal day when the massed battle spheres of the Interplanetary Council trapped his ships out near Mercury and blew

them to atoms there in the sun-beaten reaches of space. Some of the men had been captured; old Lozzo might have been one of them. Penrun knew the history of Halkon from childhood, and for a very good reason.

The ancient Martian stirred uneasily. His piercing blue eyes turned again to Penrun's face.

"Every word I have said is true, Sirro," he repeated hurriedly. "I boarded this ship at New York with the sole intention of discharging my sworn duty and giving a message to the grandson of Captain Orion Halkon, his first male descendant."

PENRUN'S eyes widened in startled amazement. He, himself, was the grandson of the notorious Halkon, a fact that not more than half a dozen people in the Universe knew—or so he had always believed. His mother, Halkon's only daughter, good and upright woman that she was, had hidden that family skeleton far back in the closet and solemnly warned Dick Penrun and his two sisters to keep it there. Yet this old man, who had singled him out of the crowd in the buffet not thirty minutes ago and drew him into conversation, knew the secret. Perhaps he really had been a cabin boy under Halkon!

"I have been serving out the hundred-year sentence for piracy the judges imposed on me, a century in your own Earth prison of Sing Sing," muttered Lozzo. "I have just been released. Quick! My inner gods tell me my vase of life is toppling. I swore to your grandfather that I would deliver the message. It is here. Guard well your own life, for this paper is a thing of evil!"

His hand rested nervously on the edge of the table. The ancient blue eyes swept the buffet with a lightning glance. Then he slid his hand forward across the polished wood. Penrun glimpsed a bit of yellow, folded paper beneath it. Then something tweaked his hair. A deafening explosion filled the buffet. Lozzo stiffened, his mouth gaped in a choked scream, and he sprawled across the table, dead.

As he fell, a fat, white hand darted over the table toward the oblong of folded, yellow paper lying unprotected on its surface. Penrun clutched at it frantically. The fat fingers closed on the paper and were gone.

Penrun whirled about. The drapes of the doorway framed a heavy, pasty face with liquid black eyes. The slug gun was aiming again, this time at Penrun. He hurled himself sideways out of his chair as it roared a second time. The heavy slug buried itself in the corpse of the old Martian on the table. The face in the doorway vanished.

THE next instant Penrun was through the door and racing down the long promenade deck under the glow of the electric lights, for the quartering sun was shining on the opposite side of the ship. Far down the deck ahead fled the slayer.

The killer paused long enough to drop an emergency bulkhead gate. Five minutes later when Penrun and the other passengers succeeded in raising it, he had disappeared. One of the emergency space-suits beside the air-lock was missing. Penrun sprang to a nearby port-hole.

Far back in space he saw the tiny figure shining in the sunlight, while the long flame of his Sextle rocket-pistol showed that he was checking his forward momentum as rapidly as possible. Unquestionably he would be picked up by some craft now trailing the liner, for the murder and theft of the paper must have been carefully planned. Penrun turned from the port-hole thoughtfully.

The liner was in an uproar. News of the murder had spread like wildfire. Women were screaming hysterically and men shouting as they

rushed about in terror, believing that the ship was in the hands of pirates. A squad of sailors passed on the double to take charge of the buffet. There would be an inquest shortly. Penrun started for his stateroom. He wanted to be alone a few minutes before the inquest took place.

His room was on the deck above. The sight of the empty passage relieved him, but he was surprised to discover that he had not locked the door when he left an hour ago. He stepped into the room.

Instantly his hands shot upward. Something was prodding him in the back.

"One move or a sound, and I shoot," warned a sharp whisper. "Stand as you are till I find what I want."

His billfold was opened and dropped with an exclamation of disappointment. The searcher hurried. Penrun calmly noted that the fingers seemed to fumble and were not at all deft at this sort of work. He glanced down, and smiled grimly. A woman! He jerked his body away from the prodding pistol, gripped the slender hand that was about to plunge into his coat pocket, and whirled round, catching the intruder in his arms.

Big, terrified dark eyes stared up at him out of a pale, heart-shaped face. Then with a sob the girl wrenched free, ran out of the door and was gone.

HE did not follow, but instead carefully locked the door and placed a chair against it. Things had been moving too rapidly for him to feel sure he was safe even now. Opening his left hand, he gazed down at a bit of crumpled yellow paper he was holding there. That much he had saved of the message from his long dead grandfather when the murderer grabbed the folded paper from the buffet table and fled.

It proved to be the bottom third of a sheet of heavy paper, and on it was drawn a piece of a map, showing a large semi-circle, which might have been a lake, and leading off from it were what might be a number of crooked canals. At the end of one of these was an "X" and the word "Here."

Below the sketch were some words that had not been torn off. He read them with growing amazement. ". . . aves of Titan. I swear this to be the true and correct place of concealment of . . . may he who comes to possess it do much good and penance, for it is drenched in blood and . . . Captain Orion Halkon."

Penrun sat for a long time in thought. Titan, the sixth moon of Saturn! Nightmare of killing heat, iron cold, and monstrous spiders! How many men had died trying to explore it! And who knew it better than Penrun himself, the only one who had ever escaped from that hellish cavern of the Living Dead? Old Halkon had hidden his treasure well indeed.

Penrun had never found the Caves. Legend described them as the one safe place on the satellite where a man might live without danger of being attacked by the spiders because the Caves were too cold for them.

Penrun doubted if there was any place that would be safe from the monstrous insects.

At any rate old Halkon had hidden his treasure there, and that part of the map that Penrun had thought was a lake was apparently the main cavern, and the canals, side passages. Old Halkon believed that he had hidden his treasure well, but he could not foresee just how well. Two thirds of the map, showing the location of the entrance to the Caves, had been taken by the murderer of the Martian, Lozzo. The remaining third, which showed the location of the treasure inside the Caves, was in Penrun's possession.

The murderer could find the Caves, but not the treasure inside; and

Penrun could find the treasure inside, but not the Caves.

Penrun folded up the crumpled bit of paper and placed it carefully in his shoe. Unless his guess was wrong, another attempt to get it would be made shortly. Undoubtedly the girl had by now reported her failure to the rest of the gang.

THE inquest was brief. The white-sheeted body of the Martian lay on the table where he had been slain. The captain of the liner called Penrun as the chief witness. He told a straightforward story of a chance acquaintance with Lozzo who, he said, seemed to be afraid of something. He had declared, so Penrun testified, that he was being hounded for a map of some kind and he wanted Penrun to see it. Then the murder had been committed, the map was stolen, and the murderer had fled. That was all, Penrun concluded, he knew about the matter.

Other passengers corroborated his story and he was dismissed.

Throughout the inquest Penrun studied the crowd of passengers that jammed the buffet, hoping he might catch a glimpse of the slender, dark-eyed girl who had tried to rob him. She was nowhere to be seen. He thought of telling the captain about her, but decided not to. She might make another attempt to get the map, and thereby give him the opportunity of rounding up the whole gang, or at least of learning who they were. He told himself grimly that if he could lay hold of her again, she would not escape so easily.

If Penrun didn't realize before that he was a marked man, it was impressed on him more forcefully three hours later on the lower deck when two men attacked him in the darkened passage near the stern. There was no time for pistols. A series of hurried fist-blows. He slugged his way free and fled to the safety of his stateroom.

Once there he locked the door and sat down to consider his position. It was obvious now that he would be followed to the outposts of space, if necessary, in an attempt to get the map from him.

AFTER half an hour's hard thinking he tossed away his fourth cigarette, loosened the pistol in his armpit holster, and slipped out of the room. He went to the captain.

"You think, then, that your life is in danger because you happened to be talking to that old Martian when he was murdered?" asked the captain, when Penrun had finished.

"No question about it," declared Penrun. "Two attempts have been made already."

"Hmm," said the captain, frowning. "A most remarkably strange business. "I've never had anything like it aboard my ship in the twenty years I've been traveling the Void."

"I can pay for the space-sphere," urged Penrun. "My certificate of credit will take care of it with funds to spare. All you have to do is to let me cast off at once. If any questions are asked, you can say it was my wish."

"Hmm! Really, Mr. Penrun, this is a most unusual request. I'm not inclined—"

He stared at the communication board. The meteor warning dial was fluctuating violently, showing the presence of a rapidly approaching body—a meteor, or perhaps a flight of them. Gongs throughout the liner automatically began to sound a warning for the passengers to get into their space suits. The captain sat as though petrified.

Penrun sprang to the small visi-screen beside the board and snapped on the current. Swiftly he revolved the periscope aerial. There appeared on the screen the hull of a long,

rakish, cigar-shaped craft which was overhauling the liner. The stranger was painted dead black and displayed no emblem.

"There's your meteor, Skipper," he remarked ironically. "And I am the attraction that is drawing it to your ship for another murder. Do I get the space-sphere?"

THE captain sprang to his feet. "You get it, Penrun. You'll have to hurry. I want no more murders aboard my ship. Here, down this private stairs to the sphere air-lock. I'll make arrangements by phone. Once you are free of the liner I'll slow down so that the black ship will have to slow down, too. That will give you a chance to pull away and get a good start on them."

Five minutes later Penrun's newly acquired craft was sliding out of its air-lock in the belly of the monstrous liner. He pulled away and glanced back.

The liner was already slowing down. The black pursuing craft was hidden by its vast, curving bulk. Penrun crowded on speed as swiftly as he dared. By the time the strange craft had made contact with the *Western Star* his little sphere had dwindled to a mere point of light in the black depths of space and vanished.

Penrun leaned over his charts grimly, as he set a new course for the sphere to follow. He, too, could play at this game. He'd carry the battle to the enemy's gate. Out to Titan he'd go and match his familiarity with the little planet against the superior numbers of his enemies.

TEN days later, Earth time, he was circling Titan, while he searched the grim, forbidden terrain beneath. After days of studying and speculation he had decided that the Caves must be situated in the Inferno Range, a place so particularly vicious that no man, so far as was known, had ever explored it. During the day the heat would boil eggs, and at night the sub-zero cold cracked great scales off the granite boulders. And here, too, lay the Trap-Door City of the monster spiders!

The grim, fantastic range soon appeared over the horizon, stabbing its saw-tooth peaks far into the sky. Dawn was still lighting the world, and a great snow-storm, a howling, furious blizzard, concealed the lower slopes of the mountains. Penrun knew that presently the driving snow-flakes would change to raindrops, and the shrieking, moaning voice of the gale would give way to the crashing, rolling thunder of the tempest. As the day advanced the storm would die abruptly and the clouds vanish under the deadly heat.

Then the Trap-Door City, which covered the slopes above the plateau at the three-thousand-foot level like a checker-board of shimmering, silken circles, would spring to febrile life as the spider monsters went streaking and leaping across the barren, distorted granite on the day's business, the hunt for food in the lowlands, and the opening of the trap-doors to gather in the heat of the day in the silken tunnel homes set in the gorges and among the boulders. At sunset the doors would all be closed, for then the rain and the electrical storm would return, and at night the blizzard. The storm-and-heat cycle was the deadly weather routine of the Infernos.

Penrun steered for a tall, cloven peak that towered high above the Trap-Door City. In its thin air and continuous cold he would be comparatively safe from marauding spider scouts, and from the peak he could watch not only the city of the monsters but the better part of the Inferno Range as well.

He was convinced that before long

the mysterious black craft would put in an appearance somewhere near this spot. Penrun knew it all to well. There by the cataract of the White River, half a mile across the plateau from the insect city, he had once been captured.

NEXT morning when he looked down on the plateau just below the Trap-Door City he laughed triumphantly. There sat the long black-hulled space craft he had seen overhauling the liner.

But a moment later he shook his head dubiously. Too brazen, that landing. It was almost in the insect city. Of course, the ship was large and heavily armed with ray-guns which poked out their sharp snouts here and there about the hull. None the less, an experienced explorer of Titan would never have flung such defiance at the spiders.

The city was feverishly alive with the monsters now. They gathered in groups to stare down at the strange craft, then raced away again, darting in and out of their trap-door homes and streaking here and there across the twisted, tortured granite of the mountainside. The Queen's palace, a vast, raised cocoon of shimmering, silken web, was a veritable bee-hive. Something was brewing!

Abruptly the trap-door homes vomited forth monstrous insects by the thousands which spread with prodigious speed along the mountainside. At an unseen signal they poured down upon the plateau and charged the space-ship.

The black craft's heavy ray-guns broke into life. Attacking monsters curled up and died as the rays bit into their onrushing ranks. The first wave melted, but an instant later the following waves buried the ship.

Insects in the rear darted here and there, dragging away dead and dying spiders. Here was food aplenty! The denizens of the Trap-Door City would live well on their dead for a few days.

Abruptly the attack ceased. The crackling ray-guns were still taking toll as the monsters scurried back to the safety of their city, leaving their dead piled high about the hull of the ship.

PENRUN wondered if the monsters would abandon the heaps of their dead. He rather expected that frenzied efforts would be made to retrieve them for food. The problem was solved by those aboard the space-ship, for presently it rose a score of feet in the air and moved a few hundred yards nearer the waterfall that marked the headwaters of the White River.

At once a frantic wave of spiders swept down across the plateau scouring it clean of the dead monsters.

After that the Trap-Door City seemed deserted. Not a spider could be seen near the shining, circular doors. Only here and there crouched a huge, bristly warrior safe behind a jutting rock with his glittering eight eyes fixed on the motionless black ship below.

Again the weary waiting. Penrun could only hope that it would not be long before those aboard the black ship gave him some hint of where the entrance to the Caves might be. Time and again he trained his glasses on the ship only to drop them resignedly. But when noon had passed and the heat of the day was scorching the rock he did not drop his glasses when he looked through them once again. Instead he stood erect in horror and dismay.

A girl had dashed out of the air-lock of the ship. She seemed to be familiar. Then he recognized her as the girl who had tried to rob him aboard the *Western Star*. Her face was drawn with agony in the stifling, overpowering heat. She had

advanced but a few yards, but she was already staggering uncertainly.

What in Heaven's name possessed her to try to venture out in that killing heat? She wasn't even dressed in a space-suit, which would have protected her against heat as well as cold. There was the danger of the monster spiders! Rescue would have to be quick!

Even as the thought flashed through his mind he knew she was past saving. Down from the nearest pinnacle of rock streaked a gigantic spider. The girl saw it, screamed, clutched her throat and fell. Ray-guns of the ship crackled frenziedly. In vain! The insect swept the helpless girl up in its powerful mandibles, sprang clear over the ship and was streaking back up among the rocks in a black blur of speed before the men inside the ship could train the guns on that side, even if they had dared to.

PENRUN watched with fascinated dread. To the cavern of the Living Dead! The monster carrying the limp girlish form was now running up through the city toward it, guarded by two other huge insects that had appeared from nowhere. Through the entrance of the cavern they darted and disappeared.

Surely those aboard the ship would make an effort to rescue her, thought Penrun, tense with horror. At least they would retaliate by raying the city with their heavy artillery. But no! The black ship only continued to rest there wavering in the heat. Penrun swore vividly. The cowards! Still, perhaps they were afraid to unlimber their heavy artillery for fear of killing the girl. Or perhaps, which was more likely, they thought she was already dead and devoured. Few persons knew about the Living Death.

Ah, well, he'd forget about her. She was an enemy, she was one of the group that was trying to rob and perhaps kill him. Perhaps her companions knew that she wouldn't be killed for two or three days, and would make an effort to rescue her. And perhaps they wouldn't.

But before an hour had passed Penrun knew that he was going to master his horror of that cavern and save her himself, or die in the attempt. He, and he alone, had been in the cavern of the Living Dead and knew what to expect—the fate that might be his as well as the girl's.

He wondered if that Englishman, that old man with the great beard who said he had known Shakespeare and Bacon personally, was still lying in his silken hammock at the far end of the cave. Know Shakespeare personally? Impossible! Yet was it more impossible than the cavern itself? The man's English was quaint and nearly unintelligible. His description of that comical old space-ship of brass and wood was plausible. Perhaps he had known the Bard of Avon.

NIGHT had descended when Penrun finally emerged from his little ship. The air was bitterly cold, and overhead the stars burned brilliantly. He paused to marvel a little that the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, and the other constellations appeared just the same out here hundreds of millions of miles from Earth as they did at home. It made one feel infinitely small to realize the pinpoint size of the Solar Universe. He shivered for the temperature was nearly forty below zero, and snapped on the current of his Ecklin electro-heater which was connected with his clothing and would keep him warm even in that cold.

Another suit of slip-on clothes with an Ecklin heater, and his lounging moccasins were in a pack on his back. If he succeeded in re-

leasing the girl, she would need them. The spider monsters didn't leave their Living Dead victims any clothing usually; and little good would it have done the Living Dead if they had.

Swiftly he descended the peak, leaping easily from rock to rock, thanks to the small gravity of the planet, and presently entered the clouds above the insect city. Abruptly the storm broke in all its fury with the shrieking of the gale and driving snow. In the blackness the pencil of light from his tiny flash showed only a few yards through the swirling, driving flakes that bit and numbed his bare face. With pistol ready he forged slowly ahead toward the cavern of the Living Dead.

He bumped into the snow-covered rock before he realized he was close to the place. With every nerve alert and the shrieking, freeezing gale forgotten he slipped the flashlight back into its holder and drew another pistol. The door, he recalled, opened inward. It was not fastened, but just inside the entrance crouched a gigantic insect on guard.

Penrun was tense and ready. He kicked the door so viciously that its elastic, silken frame sagged inward under the impact of his foot. Against the glow of the green light inside the cavern he saw a nightmarish monster rising to its feet. Both pistols stabbed viciously as the monster thrust forward a thick, bristly leg to shut the door again.

A RAY bit off the leg at the second joint. The other ray ripped open the soft, tumid abdomen. Penrun had barely time to throw himself aside as the convulsed, dying monster hurled itself tigerishly forward through the doorway out into the driving storm in a final frenzied effort to seize and rend his frail human enemy.

Penrun slipped into the cavern. The deathly cold outside would finish the horrible insect. As he kicked the big door shut he was crouched and tense, for the ancient gray attendant monster whose poisoned bite had paralyzed thousands for this living hell was moving forward curiously.

Both pistols flamed to life. The fearsome head of the monster with its poisoned mandible shriveled to nothing under the searing rays. Penrun sprang backward and jerked open the door. Then he closed it again. The old spider was moving feebly. Instead of the galvanic death of the guard, the huge gray insect's legs buckled under it and it slumped down to the floor of the cave where it quivered a few seconds, then relaxed in death.

As Penrun stepped forward around the carcass the cave filled with hysterical screams and hoarse insane shouting of joy and terror. He looked up at the high vaulted roof where the strange diamond-shaped crystal diffused its green light along the shimmering silken web, then turned his gaze downward to the rock floor beneath his feet. At last he gritted his teeth and forced himself to look at the walls.

Again he saw tier upon tier of hammocks, each holding a naked human being, helpless and paralyzed from the poisoned bite of the attendant monster spider. Some could weep, some could smile, some could talk, yet none could move either hand or foot. A few were mercifully unconscious, but the rest were not. Many were insane. Yet they all lay alike year after year, century after century, if need be, kept alive by the rays of the strange green light in the roof. This was the cavern of the Living Dead!

PENRUN knew the tragic future of these unfortunates. A few, perhaps, would go as food for the Queen in times of famine. The re-

mainder would become living incubators for the larvae of the Queen which would be planted in their living bodies by the monster attendant to eat away the vitals until death mercifully ended the victim's life, and the growing spider emerged to feed on a new victim, or to go its way.

A thousand helpless human beings swung in their silken hammocks awaiting their fate. Penrun had learned about them during those two horrible days he had been held prisoner here before he had succeeded in raying the novice attendant and the monster guard with the pistol from his armpit holster that the spiders had overlooked when they captured him. He recalled again how he had dashed frantically from hammock to hammock trying to rouse some of the Living Dead to escape with him. Not one of them could respond.

Reports to the Interplanetary Council? He had made them, written and oral, and had only been laughed at for a half-crazy explorer. The Council would not even investigate.

Now Penrun did not tarry. He strode swiftly back to the far end of the cavern.

"The girl who was just brought in, is she safe?" he asked hoarsely.

None seemed to know, but presently he knew she was still unhurt, for he found her bound hand and foot to the rock wall with heavy silken webs. Nearly all her clothing had been torn off her. She looked up hopelessly. A great fear appeared in her eyes.

"You!" she gasped. "Are you responsible for this?"

"I have come for you," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone, swiftly removing the pack from his back.

She cowered against the wall.

"You—you inhuman beast!" Her face was white with horror.

He cut the silken bonds.

"DON'T be a fool!" he said roughly. "I have no power over these monsters. Hurry into those clothes! Do you want to be bitten in the small of the back and lie paralyzed for years in a hammock like these other unfortunates, then suffer untold agony for months while spiders larvae eat out your vitals? Hurry, I say! We must get out of here at once!"

He turned away. He wanted to see that old Englishman who said he had known Shakespeare. His wish was in vain. The old man's sightless eyes stared up at the silken roof. The long, heavy beard that lay across the breast stirred. The beady, glittering eyes of an infant spider peeped out. Penrun uttered a curse of loathing. His pistol stabbed death into the foul insect.

He felt a touch on his arm. The girl was waiting.

"I am ready," she said quietly. "Oh, let us hurry!"

Dawn was lighting the world outside, and the driving blizzard was already changing to rain. Penrun seized the girl's hand and ran madly up the mountainside toward the peak. The spiders usually did not venture out in the rain, but in the face of danger from the ship they would be abroad as early as possible this morning.

Penrun suddenly spurted madly. Half a dozen gigantic spiders were moving cautiously along the lower edge of the city, their bodies looming up grotesquely in the misty rain. The girl stumbled, struck her head against a boulder, and lay still. Penrun caught her up in his arms and sprinted madly up the steep slope.

A ROCK loosened by his flying feet rattled and pounded down the hillside. Instantly the monsters whirled round, sighted him and started in pursuit. With a mighty leap he cleared a ten-foot ledge,

carrying his unconscious burden, and plunged into the sheltering mist of the clouds. Up, up! Thank God for the weak gravity!

A swishing rattle of claws on rock shot by them in the fog, turned and swept back. Penrun sprang straight upward, rising nearly a dozen feet in the air as the monsters streaked past underneath.

Only a little farther! Savagely he forced his failing strength to carry them up the slope. The air was chilling fast and the mist thinning. He broke into clear air as the fog behind them filled with the rattle of racing claws on the barren granite and the grating roar of the baffled monsters, seeking frantically for their intended victims.

He staggered on another hundred yards before he collapsed with lungs laboring desperately in the rarefied air.

Below them a bristly monster charged out of the fog, sighted them lying up among the rocks, and leaped after them. Penrun jerked up a pistol with trembling fingers and loosed its deadly ray. The huge spider stumbled and ploughed head-on among the rocks with a flurry of legs. It rose loggily, for its fierce energy was dwindling rapidly in the biting cold. Again the pistol crackled. The gigantic insect toppled over and rolled down the mountainside into the fog and vanished.

"Are we safe now?"

Penrun turned. The girl was now sitting up somewhat unsteadily, with an ugly bruise on her forehead.

"I think so," he replied. "Up there in my space-sphere we shall be quite safe."

TOGETHER they plodded silently up the sharp incline of the peak, her hand in his, And as they went he marveled that her eyes could be so beautiful now that the fear and horror had vanished from their depths.

The storm clouds below had broken up and dissolved under the increasing heat, revealing the Trap-Door City, seemingly deserted, and the motionless black ship still resting on the plateau. Penrun turned to the girl beside him in the control nest of the space-sphere.

"What are your friends waiting for all this time?" he asked abruptly.

"They're not my friends," she retorted. "And you might have guessed that they are waiting for you to arrive with the other third of the map. They are planning to surprise you and rob you of it. The entrance to the Caves is under the edge of the Cataract over there, and by waiting here they are sure to be on hand when you arrive. Only"— her brows puckered in a little frown— "I don't understand why they remain out there on the open rock after Helgers has picked a hiding-place for the ship."

"Helgers?"

"He is the leader of the gang, and he is the man who killed that poor old Martian aboard the *Western Star* for the map. Helgers learned about the treasure and the existence of the map through a convict who was with Lozzo in the prison. Helgers pretends to be an importer in Chicago—he actually owns a nice little business there—but in reality he is one of the biggest smugglers in the Universe."

"How do you come to be with him?"

"I was coming to that," she replied. "My parents live on Ganymede."

Penrun nodded. He was familiar with the fourth satellite of Jupiter and its fertile provinces.

"My father is an American, but my grandfather on my mother's side was a Medan nobleman. He was ruined by that notorious pirate,

Captain Halkon, who descended with his ships on our city and carried off everything of value, including the vast amount of scrip credits owned by the state which were entrusted to my grandfather. You know the Ganymedan debtor's law?"

He did indeed! It was one of the most infamous laws of the Universe: ruling that the debts of the father descended to the children and their children's children until paid.

"MY family is now poor," she went on. "For a century or more we have striven to pay off the debt caused by the loss of those state funds. That's the way matters stood when I received a letter from my brother Tom in Chicago, who was employed in the office of Helgers' legitimate importing business, little aware of the smuggling. Tom had somehow got wind of the near discovery of Halkon's treasure, and I saw a chance to get a part of it by joining Helgers' party. He might not want us, but he would be practically forced to take us to keep our mouths shut. I felt that we were honestly entitled to a part of that treasure which had been stolen from our family, and with it we could pay off that old debt that had ridden our family like an Old Man of the Sea for more than a century.

"Getting into the expedition proved much simpler than I had expected. When Tom told Helgers about me he was very eager to help us—he is one of those men who is always anxious to help a girl if he thinks she is good-looking enough. So you see when I held you up in your stateroom I was merely performing my part of the scheme, although I didn't know then that Helgers had already slain the old Martian and leaped out into space.

"After that the *Osprey*—the ship down there on the plateau—overhauled the *Western Star* and took us off, and shortly afterward I learned most unpleasantly that Helgers had no intention of giving Tom and me our share unless I gave myself to him in exchange. I told Tom, and trouble started. It came to a head yesterday and there was a fight and—and Helgers killed Tom."

She began to weep quietly. Penrun stared grimly down at the black, motionless ship. Presently the girl resumed her story.

"I managed to get the air-lock open and escaped from the ship. Then that horrid spider caught me. You know the rest."

Her voice trailed off. Penrun remained silent for a while.

"You haven't even told me your name," he reminded her gently.

"Irma Boardle," she replied with a wan smile.

"I am Dick Penrun, in case you don't already know me. Captain Halkon was my grandfather. We always tried to keep the knowledge of it a family secret, since we were ashamed of it. If I—we get our hands on that treasure, I can promise you that the debt hanging over your family shall be paid first, Miss Boardle."

"Not Miss Boardle. Call me Irma," she said, the wan smile growing suddenly warm.

Penrun looked at her thoughtfully.

"But we aren't near the treasure yet," he said. "Between the spider monsters and the human monsters in the ship, our chances are rather slim. We'll just have to wait until we get a break."

AS the day wore on there was a note of menace in the silence that hung over the Trap-Door City. It was nothing tangible, unless it was the appearance of two long silvery rods mounted on the top of the huge cocoon palace of the Queen aiming down at Helgers' ship. Penrun could have sworn they were not

there yesterday. The sight of them made him uneasy.

Helgers must have interpreted the silence differently, for presently a man emerged from the ship, protected against the heat by a clumsy space-suit. He hesitated, then walked slowly away from the ship, and paused again, waiting for the spiders to attack. Not a movement was made in the city. Presently he moved on again toward the cataract which had dwindled in the heat of the day to a mere trickle of hot water down to the pool in the gorge more than half a mile below.

After a time the man reached the cataract. He descended the short path that led down under the lip of rock to another ledge a few feet below it. The entrance to the Caves opened out onto this lower ledge. Little wonder, thought Penrun, that no one knew where the Caves were.

Some time later two other men from the ship followed him.

"Fools!" muttered Penrun, following them through his glasses. "They think the spiders are afraid of their ray artillery. I'll bet the monsters are either waiting until all the men wander out of the ship, or else they're getting ready to spring some hellish surprise."

Other men came out of the ship, carrying rock drills, a roll of cable and a powerful little windlass. Instead of going to the Caves, they went round the ship to the other side under the doubtful protection of the ray-guns, and sank two shafts into the granite. Into these they drove steel posts and anchored the windlass. One end of the cable was attached to the windlass and the other to the nose of the ship. Then they slowly dragged the big craft across the plateau on rollers from the ship's store room.

"THAT'S strange!" exclaimed Penrun. "The ship can't rise! I wonder what's wrong, and why they are pulling it away from instead of toward the Caves."

"I don't know what's the matter with the ship, but I believe I know why they are moving it," volunteered Irma. "They're taking it to that hiding-place I told you Helgers picked out—there behind that upthrust of rock. You see, they think you know where the Caves are because you have explored Titan, and they think you will come directly here, so they want the ship hidden to make sure you land."

Half a hundred men in their space-suits toiled like ants about the big cylindrical craft until they at last jockeyed it into position behind the natural screen of rock. Even before it was in place other men were swarming over the ship with paint machines, coloring it a granite gray. When they had finished the ship was nearly invisible from the sky.

Penrun paid little attention to their preparations. His attention was centered on those two shining rods atop the Queen's silken palace. They now aimed at the ship in its new position. A strange idea flashed through his mind. Those rods had in some mysterious way put the elevating machinery of the *Osprey* out of commission!

Suppose the spiders turned them next on his own space-sphere up here on the peak? The thought sent a shudder through him. Visions of the final flight across the nightmarish, distorted granite, the running down and capture of himself and Irma, the paralyzing bite of the monsters in the cavern of the Living Dead flashed across his mind. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead. Instinctively his hand leaped to the propulsion control and hovered there.

YET why hadn't the spiders attacked the ship, now that they had it helpless? It was not their

usual tactics to give their victims a chance to free themselves. Why, why? There could be only one answer. They were waiting for something! Penrun's eyes glinted suddenly.

"Irma," he said rapidly, "we are in serious danger. The spiders have obviously put the elevating machinery of the *Osprey* out of commission. Helgers and his men are doomed to the Living Death as surely as though they were already lying in the silken hammocks. If the monsters choose, they could do the same thing to our sphere and doom us to the same fate. I believe they are waiting for something. While they wait we have a chance to get the treasure and escape. Shall we risk it, or shall we go while we know we are safe?"

She looked up at him evenly.

"If you think we have a fair chance to get the treasure and escape, I say let's risk it," she said firmly.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Here we go!"

The little sphere slipped out of its cleft in the peak and dropped swiftly into the valley on the side opposite the Trap-Door City and its mysterious menace. Day was swiftly dying, and the lower passes of the mountains were already hazy with rapidly forming storm-clouds.

"Look!" cried Irma excitedly. "What are those things?"

Far in the distance a long line of wavering red lights snaked swiftly through the dusky valley toward them. Penrun picked up his binoculars.

"Spiders," he announced. "Scores of them. Each is carrying a sort of red torch. I have a feeling that those are what the monsters of the Trap-Door City have been waiting for."

He urged the sphere to swifter flight along the range. Miles from the Caves, he swept up over the peaks, and dropped down on the lowlands side. Dusk was deepening rapidly as he raced back toward the White River cataract under the pall of the gathering storm.

AMONG the boulders on the rough mountainside near the mouth of the Caves he eased the craft down to a gentle landing.

"Wait here," he told Irma. "I'll investigate and see if it is safe to enter the Caves."

They had seen the three men return to the ship, but others might have gone to the Caves after that. Penrun made his way down the slope to the lip of the cataract and the yawning blackness of the abysmal gorge below it.

Overhead the storm was gathering swiftly, and the saffron light of the dying day illuminated the plateau eerily. Half a mile away the Trap-Door City shimmered fantastically in the uncertain light. Penrun repressed a shudder. The Devil's own playground! Thank God, he and Irma would be out of it soon!

He crept down the narrow path that led under the ledge of the trickling cataract. Outside, a bolt of lightning stabbed down from the darkened heavens. Its lurid flash revealed the huge figure of a man, pistol in hand, beside the entrance to the Caves.

Too late to retreat now, even had he wished to. Penrun's weapon flashed first. A scream of pain and fury answered the flash, and the man's pistol clattered down on the rock. The next instant Penrun was helpless in the clutch of a mighty pair of arms that tried to squeeze the life out of him.

"Burn, me, will ye, ye dirty scum!" roared the giant of a man tightening his grip. "I'll break your damned back for ye and heave ye into the gorge!"

Penrun writhed frenziedly, trying to twist his pistol around against

his enemy's back while they struggled desperately about the ledge above the dizzy blackness of the gorge. But the pistol struck the wall beside the entrance and fell under their trampling feet.

Penrun was gasping in agony at the intolerable pain in his spine. Darting points of light danced before his eyes. Then from the opening in the rock showed a beam of white light and a man slowly emerged from the Caves. The grip on Penrun relaxed slightly as the man came toward the two combatants. Penrun could distinguish him closely now. A heavy, pasty face with liquid black eyes and a crown of thinning hair. Helgers! He was staggering and grunting under the weight of a heavy metal box.

"WHAT'S the matter, Borgain?" he asked.

"Got this bird, Penrun, we been waitin' for!"

"We don't need him, now that we already have the treasure. Still, it's a good thing we found him. Just as well to have no tales circulating about the Universe about our find. Toss him into the gorge, and go down and watch the other three chests until I get—"

"Dick, Dick!" Irma's excited voice floated down from up among the boulders. "The spiders with those red cylinder torches have arrived! They are attacking the *Osprey!*"

Helgers jerked up his head.

"Why, if it isn't the little spitfire!" he exclaimed in pleased astonishment. "I thought the damned spiders had eaten her long before this. Rather changes things, Borgain. I'll just go on up and let my little playmate know I am here. Toss our friend over the edge there, and bring up another treasure chest."

"What was that she was sayin' about the spiders attackin' the *Osprey?*" Borgain's voice was anxious.

"Oh, that's nothing the boys can't handle," said Helgers confidently. "In case they don't, we'll have to feel sorry for them and take our friend's sphere. Only have to split the treasure two ways, in that case," he added, moving up the slope.

Borgain's answer was a grunt of surprise, for his captive had squirmed suddenly out of his clutch. The big man plunged forward recklessly with arms outstretched in the groping darkness. Penrun, desperately remembering the sickening drop at their feet to the pool three thousand feet below, backed against the rock.

A flash of lightning. Borgain's ape-like arms were nearing him. Penrun lashed out at the darkened features. His knuckles bit deep into the flesh. He slipped aside as Borgain, mouthing fearful curses, rammed into the rock wall and rebounded.

AGAIN the fumbling search. Another lightning flash. Penrun struck with frenzied desperation. Borgain took the blow behind the ear and staggered. He whirled, wild with fury, and charged vainly along the narrow ledge.

"I'll get ye this time, damn your dirty carcass—ugh!"

Guided by the sound of his voice, Penrun struck with all his strength. Borgain's nose flattened under the blow. He whirled half around.

"I'll kill ye! I'll kill—help, help—a-ah!"

Lost in the blackness he had plunged over the lip of the rock, thinking he was charging Penrun. Down into the yawning gorge his body hurtled, the sound of his frenzied, dwindling screams floating up eerily out of the black, ominous depths.

Penrun crouched against the wall, sick and trembling. Irma, Helgers! He must hurry! He fumbled again for the pistols. They were gone.

Crawling forward now, still shaken by his narrow escape from death, he gained the pathway. The rain was drumming wildly on the barren granite now, and the pitch-blackness was shattered only by ghastly lightning bolts.

Guided by the flashes, he clambered up the slope and halted abruptly. The door of the space-sphere was open, and, silhouetted against the soft glow of light within it, was Irma, seated dejectedly with bowed head, heedless of the cold rain beating down upon her. Helgers was nowhere to be seen. Penrun dashed forward.

"Irma, Irma!" he cried. "What has happened? Where is he?"

She raised her head slowly and stared at him as at one risen from the dead. Then she burst into tears.

"He said they had killed you—had thrown your body into the gorge," she sobbed. "I—I just didn't want to live after that. Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," he assured her fervently. "But where is Helgers?"

"I pistoled him," she said quietly. "I had no choice. He came at me after I warned him to keep away. He fell over there among the rocks. Oh, Dick, let us hurry away from this mad place!"

HE stared at the rain-swept rocks. The heavy metal treasure chest lay a few yards away where Helgers had dropped it. Penrun moved cautiously toward the spot where he had fallen. He was gone. The rain had washed away any traces of blood that might have remained.

While Penrun hesitated, the roar of the tempest was split by a man's scream of agony. A lurid flash of lightning an instant later revealed a gigantic spider down by the cataract with Helgers' struggling body in his mandible jaws. Returning blackness blotted out the scene.

Irma's pistol stabbed a ray through the driving rain at the hideous monster. Instantly its grating roar for help rang out, and a group of red lights from the doomed *Osprey* across the plateau, detached themselves from the others and came streaking for the cataract.

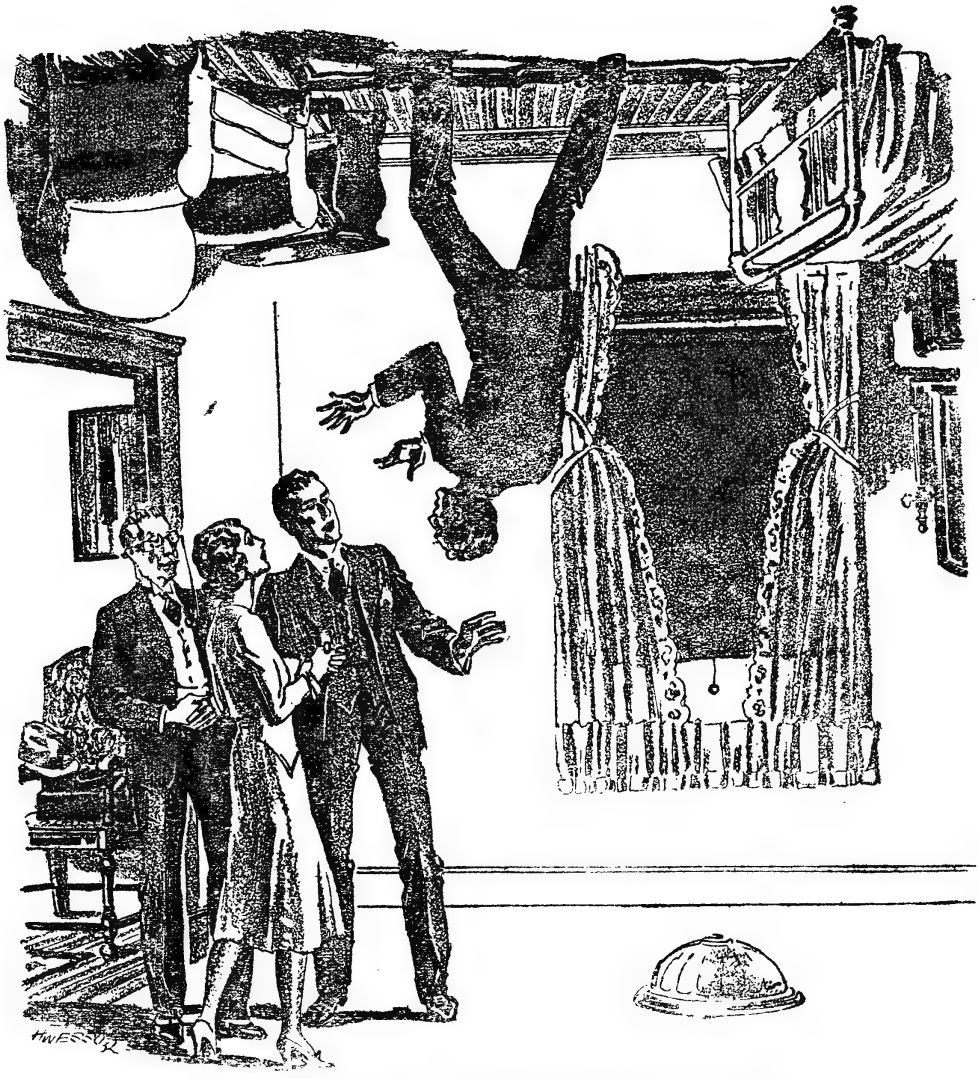
Penrun seized the heavy treasure chest and staggered to the sphere.

"Hurry, here they come!" screamed the girl.

He fell through the door with his burden just as the foremost monster leaped the river. The next instant Irma sent the sphere rocketing upward. Just before they plunged into the clouds they caught a last glimpse of the *Osprey* with her ray guns melted off by the red cylinder torches, and great holes gaping in her sides through which the monsters were carrying out the members of the crew to their cavern of the Living Dead.

As the sphere burst through the storm cloud into the frigid air above it, Irma gave a cry and pointed at the peak where they had hidden in the sphere. The peak was now alive with moving red lights of monsters searching vainly for them. The scene dropped swiftly below as the sphere gathered speed for its homeward journey.

"We got only a small portion of the treasure, but it will be enough," said Penrun. "After we pay your family's debt, I want to spend a hundred thousand or so for a specially chartered battle-sphere which will come back here to Titan. If the Interplanetary Council will do nothing about the Trap-Door City, I shall, independently. Not rays, but good old primitive bombs such as they used back in the Twentieth Century. I'll blow the hellish place off the face of the map and with it the cavern of the Living Dead. I think those lying in the hammocks would thank me for releasing them in that way."



"Wonderful! The World's Unparalleled Upside-Down Man!"

Disowned

By Victor Endersby

THE sky sagged downward, bellying blackly with a sudden summer rain, giving me a vision of catching my train in sodden clothing after the short-cut across the fields, which I was taking in company with my brother Tristan and his fiancée.

The sullen atmosphere ripped apart with an electric glare; our ears quivered to the throbbing sky, while huge drops, jarred loose from the air by the thunder - impact, splattered sluggishly, heavily,

The tragic misadventure of a man to whom the sky became an appalling abyss, drawing him ever upward.

about us. Little breezes swept out from the storm center, lifting the undersides of the long grass leaves to view in waves of lighter green. I complained peevishly.

"Ah, mop up!" said Tristan. "You've plenty of time, and there's the big oak! It's as dry under there as a cave!"

"I think that'll be fun!" twittered Alice. "To wait out a thunder-storm under a tree!"

"Under a *tree?*" I said. "Hardly! I'm not hankering to furnish myself as an exhibit on the physiological effects of a lightning stroke—no, sir!"

"Rats!" said Tristan. "All that's a fairy-tale—trees being dangerous in a thunder-storm!"

THE rain now beat through our thin summer clothing, as Tristan seized Alice's hand and towed her toward the spreading shelter. I followed them at first, then began to lag with an odd unwillingness. I had been only half serious in my objection, but all at once that tree exercised an odd repulsion on me; an imaginary picture of the electric fluid coursing through my shriveling nerve-channels grew unpleasantly vivid.

Suddenly I knew I was not going under that tree. I stopped dead, pulling my hat brim down behind to divert the rivulet coursing down the back of my neck, calling to the others in a voice rather cracked from embarrassment. They looked back at me curiously, and Alice began to twit me, standing in the rain, while Tristan desired to know whether we thought we were a pair of goldfish; in his estimation, we might belong to the piscine tribe all right, but not to that decorative branch thereof. To be frank, he used the term "suckers." Feeling exceptionally foolish, I planted myself doggedly in the soaking grass as Alice turned to dash for the tree.

Then the thing happened; the thing which to this hour makes the fabric of space with its unknown forces seem an insecure and eery garment for the body of man. Over the slight rise beyond the tree, as the air crackled, roared and shook under the thunder-blasts, there appeared an object moving in long, leisurely bounds, drifting before the wind, and touching the ground lightly each time. It was about eighteen inches in diameter, globular, glowing with coruscating fires, red, green, and yellow; a thing of unearthly and wholly sinister beauty.

Alice poised with one foot half raised, and shrieked at Tristan, half terrified, half elated at the sight. He wheeled quickly, there under the tree, and slowly backed away as the thing drifted in to keep him company in his shelter. We could not see his face, but there was a stiffness to his figure indicating something like fear. Suddenly things I had read rose into my memory. This was one of those objects variously called "fire-balls," "globe-lightning," "meteors," and the like.

I also recalled the deadly explosive potencies said to be sometimes possessed by such entities, and called out frantically:

"Tristan! Don't touch it! Get away quickly, but don't disturb the air!"

He heard me and, as the object wavered about in the comparative calm under the tree, drifting closer to him, started to obey. But it suddenly approached his face, and seized with a reckless terror, he snatched off his hat and batted at it as one would at a pestilent bee. Instantly there was a blinding glare, a stunning detonation, and a violent air-wave which threw me clear off my feet and to the ground. I sat up blindly with my vision full of opalescent lights and my ears ringing, unable to hear, see, or think.

SLOWLY my senses came back; I saw Alice struggling upright in the grass before me. She cast a quick glance toward the tree, then, still on her knees, covered her face and shuddered. For a long time, it seemed, I gazed toward the tree without sight conveying any mental effect whatever. Quite aside from my dazed state, the thing was too bizarre; it gave no foothold to experience for the erection of understanding.

My brother's body lay, or hung, or rested—what term could describe it?—with his stomach across the *under* side of a large limb a few feet above where he had stood. He was doubled up like a hairpin, his abdomen pressed tightly up against this bough, and his arms, legs and head extended stiffly, straightly, skyward.

Getting my scattered faculties and discoordinate limbs together, I made my way to the tree, the gruesome thought entering my mind that Tristan's body had been transfixed by some downward-pointing snag as it was blown up against the limb, and that the strange stiffness of his limbs was due to some ghastly sudden rigor mortis brought on by electric shock. Dazed with horror and grief, I reached up to his clothing and pulled gently, braced for the shock of the falling body. It remained immovable against the bough. A harder tug brought no results either. Gathering up all my courage against the vision of the supposed snag tearing its rough length out of the poor flesh, I leaped up, grasping the body about chest and hips, and hung. It came loose at once, without any tearing resistance such as I had expected, but manifesting a strong elastic pull upward, as though some one were pulling it with a rope; as I dropped back to the ground with it, the upward resistance remained unchanged. Nearly disorganized entirely by this phenomenon, it occurred to me that his belt or some of his clothing was still caught, and I jerked sidewise to pull it loose. It did not loosen, but I found myself suddenly out from under the tree, my brother dragging upward from my arms until my toes almost left the ground. And there was obviously no connection between him and the tree—or between him and anything else but myself, for that matter. At this I went weak; my arms relaxed despite my will, and an incredible fact happened: I found the body sliding skyward through my futile grasp. Desperately I got my hands clasped together about his wrist, this last grip almost lifting me from the earth; his legs and remaining arm streamed fantastically skyward. Through the haze which seemed to be finally drowning my amazed and tortured soul, I knew that my fingers were slipping through one another, and that in another instant my brother would be gone. Gone—where? Why and how?

THERE was a sudden shriek, and the impact of a frantic body against mine, as Alice, whom I had quite forgotten, made a skyward running jump and clasped the arm frantically to her bosom with both her own. With vast relief, I loosed my cramped fingers—only to feel her silken garments begin to slide skyward against my cheek. It was more instinct than sense which made me clutch at her legs. God, had I not done that! As it was, I held both forms anchored with only a slight pull, waiting dumbly for the next move—quite *non compos* by this time, I think.

"Quick, Jim!" she shrieked. "Quick, under the tree! I can't hold him long!"

Very glad indeed to be told what to do, I obeyed. Under her direc-

tion we got the body under a low limb and wedged up against it, where with our feet both now on the ground, we balanced it with little effort. Feverishly, once more at her initiative, we took off our belts and strapped it firmly; whereupon we collapsed in one another's arms, shuddering, beneath it.

The blasé reader may consider that we here manifested the characters of sensitive weaklings. But let him undergo the like! The supernatural, or seemingly so, has always had power to chill the hottest blood. And here was an invisible horror reaching out of the sky for its prey, without any of the ameliorating trite features which would temper an encounter with the alleged phenomena of ghostland.

For a time we sat under that fatal tree, listening to the dreary drench of rain pouring off the leaves, quivering nerve-shaken to the thunderclaps. Lacking one another, we had gone mad; it was the beginning of a mutual dependence in the face of the unprecedented, which was to grow to something greater during the bizarre days to follow.

There was no need of words for each of us to know that the other was struggling frantically for a little rational light on the *outre* catastrophe in which we were entangled.

It never once occurred to us that my brother might still be alive—until a long shuddering groan sounded above us. In combined horror and joy we sprang up. He was twisting weakly in the belts, muttering deliriously. We unfastened him and pulled him to the ground, where I sat on his knees while she pressed down on his shoulders, and so kept him recumbent, both horrified at the insistent lift of his body under us.

She kissed him frantically and stroked his cheeks, I feeling utterly without resource. He grew stronger, muttered wildly, and his eyes opened, staring upward through the tree limbs. He became silent, and stiffened, gazing fixedly upward with a horror in his wild blue gaze which chilled our blood. What did he see there—what dire otherworld thing dragging him into the depths of space? Shortly his eyes closed, and he ceased to mutter.

I TOOK his legs under my arms —the storm was clearing now— and we set out for home with gruesomely buoyant steps, the insistent pull remaining steady. Would it increase? We gazed upyard with terrified eyes, becoming calmer by degrees as conditions remained unchanged.

When the country house loomed near across the last field, Alice faltered:

"Jim, we can't take him right in like this!"

I stopped.

"Why not?"

"Oh, because—because—it's too ridiculously awful. I don't know just how to say it—oh, can't you see it yourself?"

In a dim way, I saw it. No cultured person cares to be made a center of public interest, unless on grounds of respect. To come walking in in this fashion, buoyed balloon-like by the body of this loved one, and before the members of a frivolous, gaping house party—ah, even I could imagine the mingled horror and derision, the hysterics among the women, perhaps. Nor would it stop there. Rumors—and heaven only knows what distortions such rumors might undergo, having their source in the incredible—would range our social circle like wildfire. And the newspapers, for our families are established and known—no, it wouldn't go.

I tied Tristan to a stile and called up Jack Briggs, our host,

from a neighboring house, explained briefly that Tristan had met with an accident, asked him to say nothing, and explained where to bring the machine. In ten minutes he had maneuvered the heavy sedan across the rough wet fields. And then we had another problem on our hands: to let Jack into what had happened without shocking him into uselessness. It was not until we got him to test Tristan's eery buoyancy with his own hands that we were able to make him understand the real nature of our problem. And after that, his comments remained largely gibberish for some time. However, he was even quicker than we were to see the need for secrecy—he had vivid visions of the political capital which opposing newspapers would make of any such occurrence at his party—and so we arranged a plan. According to which we drove to the back of the house, explained to the curious who rushed out that Tristan had been injured by a stroke of lightning, and rushed the closely wrapped form up to his room, feeling a great relief at having something solid between us and the sky. While Jack went downstairs to dismiss the party as courteously as possible, Alice and I tied my brother to the bed with trunk straps. Whereupon the bed and patient plumped lightly but decisively against the ceiling as soon as we removed our weight. While we gazed upward open mouthed, Jack returned. His faculties were recovering better than ours, probably because his affections were not so involved, and he gave the answer at once.

"Ah, hell!" said he. "Pull the damn bed down and spike it to the floor!" This we did. Then we held a short but intense consultation. Whatever else might be the matter, obviously Tristan was suffering severely from shock and, for all we knew, maybe from partial electrocution. So we called up Dr. Grosnoff in the nearest town.

GROSNOFF after our brief but disingenuous explanation, threw off the bed covers in a business-like way, then straightened up grimly.

"And may I ask," he said with sarcastic politeness, "since when a strait-jacket has become first aid for a case of lightning stroke?"

"He was delirious," I stammered.

"Delirious my eye! He's as quiet as a lamb. And you've tied him down so tightly that the straps are cutting right into him! Of all the —the—" He stopped, evidently feeling words futile, and before we could make an effective attempt to stop him, whipped out a knife and cut the straps. Tristan's unfortunate body instantly crashed against the ceiling, smashing the lathing and plaster, and remaining half embedded in the ruins. A low cry of pain rose from Alice. Dr. Grosnoff staggered to a chair and sat down, his eyes fixed on the ceiling with a steady stare—the odd caricature of a man coolly studying an interesting phenomenon.

My brother appeared to be aroused by the shock, struggling about in his embedment, and finally sat up. Up? *Down,* I mean. Then he *stood, on the ceiling,* and began to walk! His nose had been bruised by the impact, and I noticed with uncomprehending wonder that the blood moved slowly *upward* over his lip. He saw the window, and walked across the ceiling to it upside down. There he pushed the top of the window down and leaned out, gazing up into the sky with some sort of fascination. Instantly he crouched on the ceiling, hiding his eyes, while the house rang with shriek after shriek of mortal terror, speeding the packing of the parting guests. Alice seized my

arm, her fingers cutting painfully into the flesh.

"Jim," she screamed. "I see it now—don't you? His gravity's all changed around—he weighs *up!* He thinks the sky's *under* him!"

The human mind is so constructed that merely to name a thing oddly smooths its unwonted outlines to the grasp of the mind; the conception of a simple reversal of my brother's weight, I think, saved us all from the padded cell. That made it so commonplace, such an everyday sort of thing, likely to happen to anybody. The ordinary phenomenon of gravitation is no whit more mysterious, in all truth, than that which we were now witnessing—but we are born to *it!*

DR. GROSNOFF recovered in a manner which showed considerable caliber.

"Well," he grunted, "that being the case, we'd best be about looking after him. Nervous shock, possible electric shock and electric burns, psychasthenia—that's going to be a long-drawn affair—bruises, maybe a little concussion and possibly internal injury—that was equivalent to a ten-foot unbroken fall flat on his stomach, and I'll never forgive myself if. . . . Get me a chair!"

With infinite care and reassuring words, the big doctor with our help pulled my brother down, the latter frantically begging us not to let him "fall" again. Holding him securely on the bed and trying to reassure him, Grosnoff said:

"Straps and ropes won't do. His whole weight hangs in them—they'll cut him unmercifully. Take a sheet, tie the corners with ropes, and let him lie in that like a hammock!"

It took many reassurances as to the strength of this arrangement before Tristan was at comparative peace. Dr. Grosnoff effected an examination by slacking off the ropes until Tristan lay a couple of feet clear of the bed, then himself lay on the mattress face up, prodding the patient over.

The examination concluded, he informed us that Tristan's symptoms were simply those of a general physical shock such as would be expected in the case of a man standing close to the center of an explosion, though from our description of the affair he could not understand how my brother had survived at all. The glimmering of an explanation of this did not come until a long time afterwards. So far as physical condition was concerned, Tristan might expect to recover fully in a matter of weeks. Mentally—the doctor was not so sure. The boy had gone through a terrible experience, and one which was still continuing—might continue no one knew how long. We were, said the doctor, up against a trick played by the great Sphinx, Nature, and one which, so far as he knew, had never before taken place in the history of all mankind.

"There is faintly taking shape in my mind," he said, "the beginning of a theory as to how it came about. But it is a theory having many ramifications and involving much in several lines of science, with most of which I am but little acquainted. For the present I have no more to say than that if a theory of causation can be worked out, it will be the first step toward cure. But—it may be the only step. Don't build hopes!"

Looking Alice and me over carefully, he gave us each a nerve sedative and departed, leaving us with the feeling that here was a man of considerably wider learning than might be expected of a small-town doctor. In point of fact, we learned that this was the case. The specialist has been described as a "man

who knows more and more about less and less." In Dr. Grosnoff's mind, the "less and less" outweighed the "more and more."

TRISTAN grew stronger physically; mentally, he was intelligent enough to help us and himself by keeping his mind as much as possible off his condition, sometimes by sheer force of will. Meantime, Dr. Grosnoff, realizing that his patient could not be kept forever tied in bed, had assisted me in preparing for his permanent care at home. The device was simple; we had just taken his room, remodeled the ceiling as a floor, and fitted it with furniture upside down. Most of the problems involved in this were fairly simple. The matter of a bath rather stumped us for a while, until we hit upon a shower. The jets came up from under Tristan's feet, from the point of view of his perceptions; he told us that one of the strangest of all his experiences was to see the waste water swirl about in the pan *over* his head, and being sucked *up* the drain as though drawn by some mysterious magnet.

My brother and I shared a flat alone, so there was no servant problem to deal with. But he was going to need care as well as companionship, and I had to earn my living. For Alice, it was a case where the voice of the heart chimed with that of necessity; and I was best man at perhaps the weirdest marriage ceremony which ever took place on this earth. Held down in bed with the roped sheet, all betraying signs carefully concealed, Tristan was married to Alice by an unsuspecting dominie who took it all for one of those ordinary, though romantic sick-bed affairs.

From the first, Tristan felt better and more secure in his special quarters, and was now able to move about quite freely within his limits; though such were his mental reactions that for his comfort we had to refinish the floor to look like a plaster ceiling, to eliminate as far as possible the upside-down suggestions left in the room, and to keep the windows closely shaded. I soon found that the sight of me, or any one else, walking upside down—to him—was very painful; only in the case of Alice did other considerations remove the unpleasantness.

Little by little the accumulation of experience brought to my mind the full and vivid horror of what the poor lad had suffered and was suffering. Why, when he had looked out of that window into the sky, he was looking *down* into a bottomless abyss, from which he was sustained only by the frail plaster and planking under his feet! The whole earth, with its trees and buildings, was suspended over his head, seemingly about to fall at any moment with him into the depths; the sun at noon glared *upward* from the depths of an inferno, lighting from *below* the somber earth suspended overhead! Thus the warm comfort of the sun, which has cheered the heart of man from time immemorial, now took on an unearthly, unnatural semblance. I learned that he could never quite shake off the feeling that the houses were anchored into the earth, suspended only by the embedment of their foundations in the soil; that trees were suspended from their roots, which groaned with the strain; that soil was held to the bedrock only by its cohesion. He even dreaded lest, during storms, the grip of the muddy soil be loosened, and the fields fall into the blue! It was only when clasped tight in Alice's arms that the horrors wholly left him.

All the reasoning we might use on his mind, or that he himself could bring to bear on it, was use-

less. We found that the sense of up and down is ineradicably fixed by the balancing apparatus of the body.

MEANWHILE, his psychology was undergoing strange alterations; the more I came to appreciate the actual conditions he was living under, the more apparent it seemed to me that he must have a cast-iron mental stamina to maintain sanity at all. But he not only did that; he began to recover normal strength, and to be irked unbearably by his constant confinement. So it came about that he began to venture a little at a time from his room, wandering about on the ceiling of the rest of the house. However, he could not yet look out of windows, but sidled up to them with averted face to draw any blinds that were up.

As he grew increasingly restless, we all felt more and more that the thing could not continue as it was; *some* way out must be found. We had many a talk with Grosnoff, at last inducing him to speak about the still half-formed theory which he had dimly conceived at the first.

"For a good many decades," he said, "there have been a few who regarded the close analogies between magnetism and gravitational action as symptomatic of a concealed identity between them. Einstein's 'Field Theory' practically proves it on the mathematical side. Now it is obvious that if gravitation is a form of magnetism—and if so it belongs to another plane of magnetic forces than that which we know and use—then the objects on a planet must have the opposite polarity from that of the planet itself. Since the globe is itself a magnet, with a positive and negative pole, its attraction power is not that of a magnet on any plane, because then the human race would be divided into two species, each polarized in the sign opposite to its own pole; when an individual of either race reached the equator, he would become weightless, and when he crossed it, would be repelled into space."

"Lord!" I said. "There would be a plot for one of your scientific fiction writers!"

"I CAN present you with another," said Dr. Grosnoff. "How do we know whether another planet would have the opposite sign to our own bodies?"

"Well," I chuckled, "they'll find that out soon enough when the first interplanetary expedition tries to land on one of 'em!"

"Hmf!" grunted the medico. "That'll be the least of their troubles!"

"But you said the polarity couldn't be that of a magnet; then what?"

"Don't you remember the common pith ball of your high school physics days? An accumulation of positive electricity repels an accumulation of negative—if indeed we can correctly use 'accumulation' for a negativity—and it is my idea that the earth is the container of a gigantic accumulation of this meta—or hyper-electricity which we are postulating; and our bodies contain a charge of the opposite sign."

"But, Doctor, the retention of a charge of static electricity by a body in the presence of one of the opposite sign requires insulation of the containing bodies; for instance, lightning is a breaking down of the air insulation between the ground and a cloud. In our case we are constantly in contact with the earth, and the charges would equalize."

"Please bear in mind, Jim, that we are not talking about electricity as now handled by man, but about some form of it as yet hypotheti-

cal. We don't know what kind of insulation it would require. We may be *constitutionally* insulated."

"And you think the fire-ball broke down that insulation by the shock to Tristan's system?" I asked. The logic of the thing was shaping up hazily, but unmistakably. "But, then, why don't we frequently see people kiting off the earth as the result of explosions?"

"*How do you know they haven't?* Don't we have plenty of mysterious disappearances as the result of explosions, and particularly, strangely large numbers of missing in a major war?"

My blood chilled. The world was beginning to seem a pretty awful place.

Grosnoff saw my disturbance, and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"I'm afraid," he said, smiling, "that I rather yielded to the temptation to get a rise out of you. That suggestion *might* be unpleasantly true under special circumstances. But I particularly have an eye out for the special capacities of that weird and rare phenomenon, the fire-ball. It isn't impossible that the energy of the fire-ball went into the repolarization rather than into a destructive concussion—hence Tristan's escape."

"You mean its effect is *qualitatively* different from that of any other explosion?"

"It may be so. It is known to be an electric conglomeration of some kind—but that's all."

MEANTIME circumstances were not going well with us; the financial burden of Tristan's support, added to the strain of the situation, was becoming overwhelming. Tristan knew this and felt it keenly; this brought him to a momentous decision. He looked down at us from the ceiling one day with an expression of unusual tenseness, and announced that he was going out permanently, and to take part in the world again.

"I've gotten now so that I can bear to look out of the windows quite well. It's only a matter of time and practise until I can stand the open. After all, it isn't any worse than being a steel worker or steeplejack. Even if the worst came to the worst, I'd rather be burst open by the frozen vacuum of interstellar space than to splash upon a sidewalk before an admiring populace—and people do *that* every day!"

Dr. Grosnoff, who was present, expressed great delight. His patient was coming along well mentally, at least. Alice sat down, trembling.

"But, good Lord, Tristan," I said, "what possible occupation could you follow?"

"Oh, I've brooded over that for weeks, and I've crossed the Rubicon. I think we're a long way past such petty things as personal pride. Did it ever occur to you that what from one point of view is a monstrous catastrophe, from another is an asset?"

"What in the dickens are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm talking about the—the—" he gulped painfully—"the stage."

Alice wrung her hands, crying bitterly:

"Wonderful! Splendid! 'Tristan LeHuber, The World's Unparalleled Upside-Down Man! He Doesn't Know Whether He's On His Head Or His Heels. He's Always Up In The Air About Something, But You Can't Upset Him! Vaudeville To-night—The Bodongo Brothers, Brilliant Burmese Balancers—Arctic Annie, the Prima Donna of Sealdom, and Tristan LeHuber, The Balloon Man—He Uses An Anchor For A Parachute!' At last indeed the LeHuber family will have arrived sensationally in the public eye!

"There are," Alice raved, "two billion people on the earth to-day. Counting three generations per century, there have been about twelve billion of us in the last two hundred years. And out of all those, and all the millions and billions before that, *we* had to be picked for this loathsome cosmic joke—just little us for all that distinction! Why, oh, why? If our romance *had* to be spoiled by a tragedy smeared across the billboards of notoriety, why couldn't it have been in some decent, human sort of way? Why this ghastly absurdity?"

"From time immemorial," said Grosnoff, "there have been men who sought to excite the admiration of their fellows, to get themselves worshiped, to dominate, to collect perquisites, by developing some wonderful personal power or another. From Icarus on down, levitation or its equivalent has been a favorite. The ecstatics of medieval times, the Hindu Yogis, even the day-dreaming schoolboy, have had visions of floating in air before the astounding multitudes by a mere act of will. The frequency of 'flying dreams' may indicate such a thing as a possibility in nature. Tradition says many have accomplished it. If so, it was by a reversal of polarity through *an act of will.* Those who did it—Yogis—believed in successive lives on earth. If they were right about the one, why not the other? Suppose one who had developed that power of will, carried it another birth, where it lay dormant in the subconscious until set off uncontrolled by some special shock?"

Alice paled.

"Then Tristan might have been—"

"He might. Then again, maybe my brain is addled by this thing. In any case, the moral is: don't monkey with Nature! She's particular."

TRISTAN'S vaudeville scheme was not as easily realized as said. The first manager to whom we applied was stubbornly skeptical in spite of Tristan's appearance standing upside down in stilts heavily weighted at the ground ends; and even after his resistance was broken down in a manner which left him gasping and a little woozy, began to reason unfavorably in a hard-headed way. Audiences, he explained, were off levitation acts. Too old. No matter what you did, they'd lay it to concealed wires, and yawn. Even if you called a committee from the audience, the committee itself would merely be sore at not being able to solve the trick; the audience would consider the committee a fake or merely dumb. And all that would take too much time for an act of that kind.

"Oh, yeh, I know! It's got *me* goin', all right. But I can't think like me about this sorta thing. I got to think like the audience does—or go outa business!"

After which solid but unprofitable lesson in psychology, we dropped the last vestige of pride and tried a circus sideshow. But the results were similar.

"Nah, the rubes don't wear celluloid collars any more. Ya can't slip any wire tricks over on 'em!"

"But he can do this in a big topless tent, or even out in an open field, if you like."

"Nope—steel rods run up the middle of a rope has been done before."

"Steel rods in a rope which the people see uncoil from the ground in front of their eyes?"

"Well, they'd think of somethin' else, then. I'm tellin' ya, it won't go! Sure, people like to be fooled, but they want it to be done *right!*"

"Yes!" I sneered. "And a hell of a lot of people have fooled themselves *right* about this matter, too!"

He looked at me curiously.

"Say, have ya really got somethin' up y'r sleeve?"

"You'd be surprised!"

Thus he grudgingly gave us a chance for a tryout; and he *was* surprised indeed. But on thinking it over, he decided like the vaudeville man.

"Listen!" said Tristan suddenly, in a voice of desperation. "I'll do a parachute jump into the sky, and land on an airplane!"

"Tristan!" shrieked Alice, in horror.

The circus man nearly lost his cigar, then bit it in two.

"Sa-ay—what the—I'll call that right now! I'll get ya the plane and chute if y'll put up a deposit to cover the cost. If ya do it, we'll have the best money in the tents; if ya don't, I keep the money!"

"If I don't," said Tristan distinctly, "I'll have not the slightest need for the money."

But the airplane idea was out; we could think of no way for him to make the landing on such a swiftly-moving vehicle.

Again Alice solved it.

"If you absolutely must break my heart and put me in a sanitarium," she sobbed, "get a blimp!"

Of course! And that is what we did—on the first attempt coming unpleasantly close to doing just that to Alice.

THE blimp captain was obviously skeptical, and betrayed signs of a peeve at having his machine hired for a hoax; but money was money and he agreed to obey our instructions meticulously. His tone was perfunctory, however, despite my desperate attempts to impress him with the seriousness of the matter; and that nonchalance of his came near to having dire consequences.

The captain was supplied with a sort of boat-hook with instructions to steer his course to reach the parachute ropes as it passed him on its upward flight. And he was seriously warned of the fact that, after the chute reached two or three thousand feet, its speed would increase because of the rarefaction of the air; and in case of a miss, it would become constantly harder to overtake. These directions he received with a scornful half smile; obviously he never expected to see the chute open.

We got all set, the blimp circling overhead, Tristan upside down in his seat suspended skyward, a desperately grim look on his face; and Alice almost in collapse. We were all spared the agony of several hundred feet of unbroken fall; the parachute was open on the ground, and rose at a leisurely speed, but too fast at that for the comfort of any of us. I don't think the wondering crowd and the dumfounded circus people ever saw a stranger sight than that chute drifting upward into the blue. We heard nothing of "hidden wires," then or ever after! The white circle grew pitifully small and forlorn against the fathomless azure; and suddenly we noticed that the blimp seemed to be merely drifting with the wind, making no attempt to get under—or over—Tristan. Our hearts labored painfully. Had the engines broken down? Alice buried her face against my sleeve with a moan.

"I can't look . . . tell me!"

I tried to—in a voice which I vainly tried to make steady.

All at once the blimp went into frenzied activity—we learned afterwards that its crew of three, captain included, had been so completely paralyzed by the reality of the event that they had forgotten what they were there for until almost too late. Now we heard the high note of its overdriven engines as it rolled and rocked toward the rising chute. For a moment the white spot showed against its gray

side, then tossed and pitched wildly in the wake of the propellers as, driven too hastily and frenziedly, the ship overshot its mark and the captain missed his grab.

I COULD only squeeze Alice tightly and choke as the aerial objects parted company and the blue gap between them widened. Instantly, avid to retrieve his mistake, the captain swung his craft in a wild careen around and a spiral upward. But he tried to do too many things at a time—make too much altitude and headway both at once. The blimp pitched steeply upward to a standstill, barely moving toward the parachute. Quickly it sloped downward again and gathered speed, nearing the chute, and then making a desperate zoom upward on its momentum. Mistake number three! He had waited too long before using his elevator; and the chute fled hopelessly away just ahead of the uptilted nose of the blimp. I could only moan, and Alice made no sound or movement.

Next we saw the blimp's water ballast streaming earthward in the sun, and it was put into a long, steady spiral in pursuit of the parachute, whose speed—or so it seemed to my agonized gaze—was now noticeably on the increase. The altitude seemed appallingly great; the blimp's ceiling, I knew, was only about twenty thousand; and my brother, even if not frozen to death by that time, would be traveling far faster then than any climbing speed the blimp could make; as his fall increased in speed, the climb of the bag decreased.

At last, with a quiver of renewed hope, I saw the blimp narrowing down its spirals—it was overtaking! Smaller and smaller grew both objects—but so did the gap between them! At last they merged, the tiny white dot and the little gray minnow. In one long agony I waited to see whether the gap would open out again. Lord of Hosts—the blimp was slanting steeply downward; the parachute had vanished!

Then at last I paid some attention to the totally limp form in my arms; and a few minutes later, amid an insane crowd, a pitifully embarrassed and nerve-shaken dirigible navigator was helping me lift my heavily-wrapped, shivering brother from the gondola, while the mechanics turned their attention to the overdriven engines and wracked framing. Did I say "helping me lift?" Such is the force of habit—but verily, a new nomenclature would have to come into being to deal adequately with such a life as my poor brother's!

Tristan seized my hand.

"Jim!" he said through chattering teeth, "I'm cured—cured of the awful fear! That second time he missed, I just gave up entirely; I didn't **care** any longer. And then somehow I felt such a sense of peace and freedom—there weren't any upside-down things around to torture me, no sense of insecurity. I just *was*, in a great blue quiet; it wasn't like falling at all; no awful shock to meet, no sickness or pain—just quietly floating along from Here to There, with no particular dividing line between, anywhere. The cold hurt, of course, but somehow it didn't seem to matter, and was getting better when they caught me. But now—I can do things you never even imagined!"

THUS began my brother's real public career—he had arrived. After that he was able to name his own compensation, and shortly during his tours, began to sport a private dirigible of his own, which he often used for jumps between stands. He told me jokingly that it was very fitting transportation

for him, as his hundred and sixty pound lift saved quite a bit of expense for helium!

He developed an astonishing set of tricks. After the jump, he would arrive on the field suspended above the dirigible doing trapeze tricks. After that, in the show tent, he would go through some more of them, with a few hair raisers of his own invention, one of which consisted of apparently letting go the rope by accident and shooting skyward with a wild shriek, only to be caught at the end of a fine, especially woven piano wire cable attached to a spring safety belt, the cable being in turn fastened into the end of the rope.

Needless to say, Alice was unable to wax enthusiastic about any of these feats, though she loyally accompanied him in his travels. She would sit in the tent gazing at him with a horrible fascination, and month by month grew thinner and more strained. Tristan felt her stress deeply; but was making money so fast that we all felt that in a short time, if not able to finance the discovery of a cure, at least he could retire and live a safer life. And he found his ideal haven of rest—in a Pennsylvania coal mine! Thus, the project grew in his mind, of buying an abandoned mine and fitting it with comfortable and spacious inverted quarters, environed with fungus gardens, air ferns and the like, plants which could be trained to grow upside down; he emerging only for necessary sun baths.

As time went on, I really grew accustomed to the situation, though seeing less and less of Tristan and Alice; during summers they were on tour, and in winter were quartered in Tristan's coal mine, which had become a reality.

So one summer day when the circus stopped at a small town where I was taking vacation, I was overjoyed at the opportunity to see them. I timed myself to get there as the afternoon performance was over, but arrived a little early, and went on into the untopped tent.

Tristan waved an inverted greeting at me from his poise on his trapeze, and I watched for a few minutes. There was an odd mood about the crowd that day, largely due to a group of loud-mouthed hill-billies from the back country —the sort which is so ignorant as to live in perpetual fear of getting "something slipped over," and so disbelieves everything it is told, looking for something ulterior behind every exterior. Having duly exposed to their own satisfaction the strong man's "wooden dumbbells," the snake charmer's rubber serpents, the fat woman's pillows, and the bearded lady's false whiskers (I don't know what they did about the living skeleton), these fellows were now gaping before Tristan's platform, and growing hostile as their rather inadequate brains failed to cook up any damaging explanation.

"Yah!" yelled a long-necked, flap-eared youth, suddenly. "He's got an iron bar in that rope!" They had come too late to see the parachute drop. Tristan grinned and pulled himself down the rope, which of course fell limp behind him. At this, the crowd jeered and booed the too-hasty youth, who became so resentfully abusive of Tristan that one of the attendants pushed him out of the tent. As he passed me, I caught fragments of wrathy words:

"Wisht I had a. . . . Show'm whether it's a fake. . . ."

TRISTAN closed his act by dropping full length to the end of his invisible wire, then pulled himself down, got into his stilts, and was unfastening the belt, when the manager rushed in with a re-

quest that he repeat, for the benefit of a special party just arrived on a delayed train.

"Go on and look at the animals, old man," Tristan called to me. "I'll be with you in about half an hour!"

I strolled out idly, meeting on the way the flap-eared youth, who seemed bent on making his way back into the tent, wearing a mingled air of furtiveness, of triumph, and anticipation. Wondering casually just what kind of fool the lad was planning to make of himself next, I wandered on toward the main entrance—only to be stopped by an appalling uproar behind me. There was a raucous, gurgling shriek of mortal terror; the loud composite "O-o-o!" of a shocked or astonished crowd; a set of fervent curses directed at some one; loud confused babbling, and then a woman's voice raised in a seemingly endless succession of hysterical shrieks. Thinking that an animal had gotten loose, or something of that kind, I wheeled. Unmistakably the racket came from Tristan's own tent.

Cold dread clutching at my heart, and with lead on my boot soles, I rushed frantically back. At the entrance I was held by a mad onrush of humanity for some moments. When I reached the platform, Tristan was not in sight. Then I noticed the long-necked boy sitting on the platform with his face in his hands, shrieking:

"I didn't mean to! I didn't mean to! Damn it, don't touch me! I thought sure it was a fake!"

I saw a new, glittering jackknife lying on the platform beside the limp, foot-long stub of Tristan's rope. Slowly, frozenly, I raised my eyes. The blue abyss was traceless of any object. . . .

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An Amazing Story

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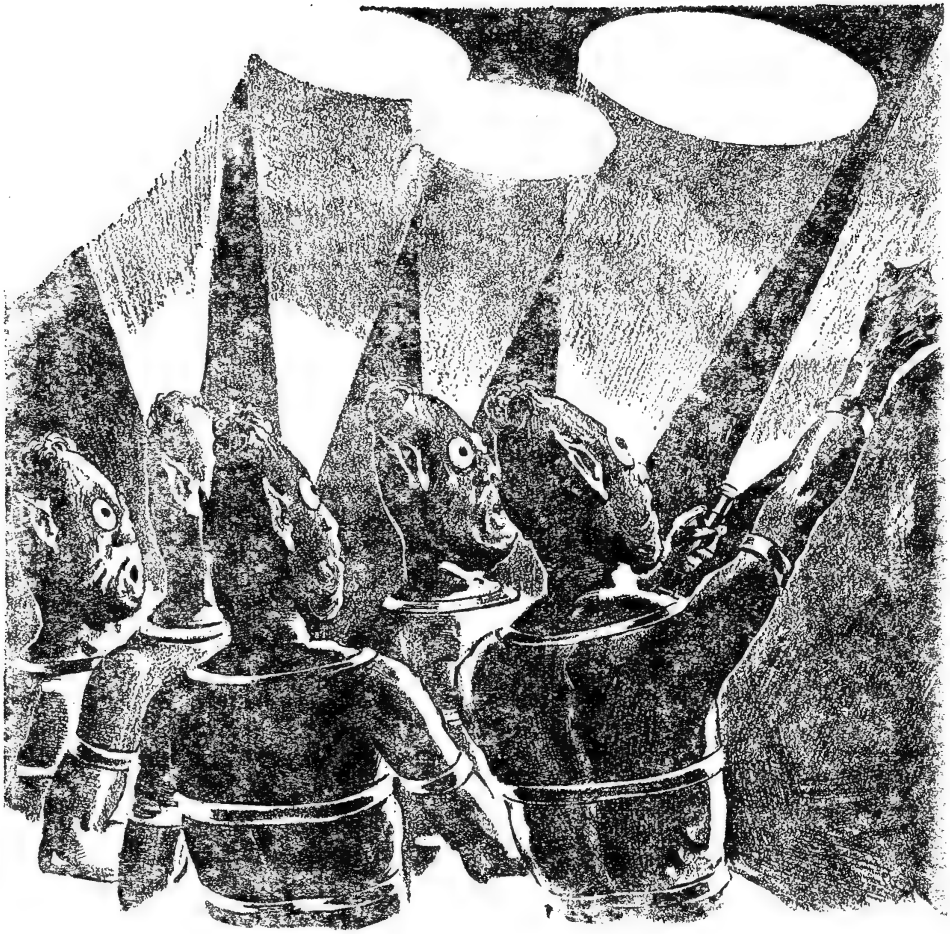
An Unusual Tale of the Future

By A. L. Zagat

—And Others!



One of them pointed at the shaft Rawson had drilled.

Two Thousand Miles Below

Part Two of a Four-Part Novel

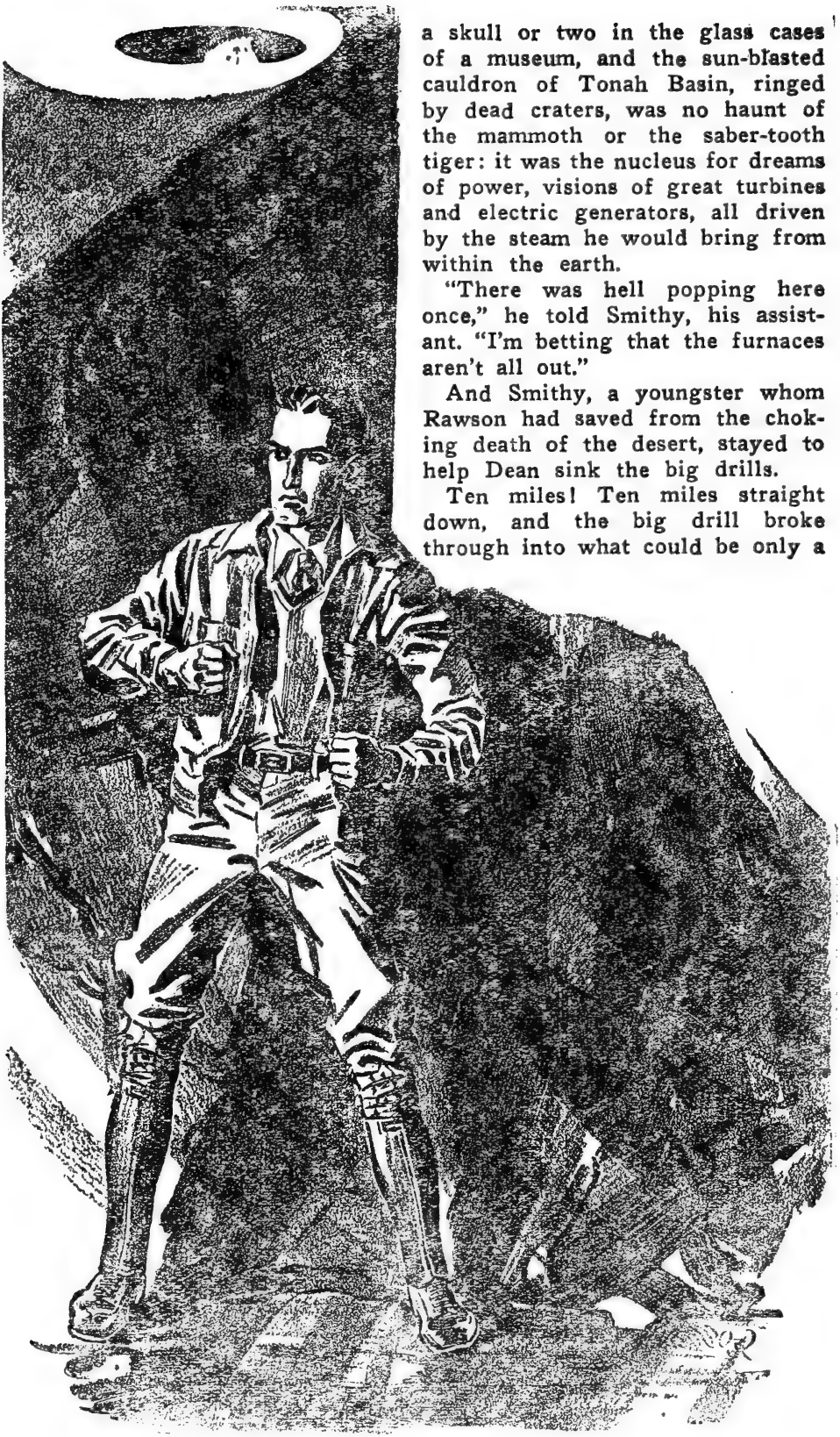
By Charles Willard Diffin

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

WHEN the world was young and the races of men took their living by the force of their knotted muscles and the weight of their stone-headed clubs, there came the time of the great cold. Beasts and men either migrated or died. But the tribe of Zoran, with their leader, Gor, did neither. They went far back in their caves to a hole in the rock, down which a strong man might climb; they found their refuge inside the earth. . . .

Town after town is fired by the emerging Red Ones as Rawson lies helpless, a prisoner, far down in their home within the Earth.

To Dean Rawson, American mining engineer, pre-glacial man was a matter of



a skull or two in the glass cases of a museum, and the sun-blasted cauldron of Tonah Basin, ringed by dead craters, was no haunt of the mammoth or the saber-tooth tiger: it was the nucleus for dreams of power, visions of great turbines and electric generators, all driven by the steam he would bring from within the earth.

"There was hell popping here once," he told Smithy, his assistant. "I'm betting that the furnaces aren't all out."

And Smithy, a youngster whom Rawson had saved from the choking death of the desert, stayed to help Dean sink the big drills.

Ten miles! Ten miles straight down, and the big drill broke through into what could be only a

huge cavern—broke through, then plunged itself into molten gold, and came up bedecked in "jewelry," as Riley, the drill foreman, said, "like a rich Indian squaw!"

To Rawson, that meant only that the heat he had looked for was there. Jubilant, he sent down a pyrometer, but the tube of Krieger alloy, tremendously heat resistant, came back sheared off cleanly, the end of it fused.

The big drill was melted off when it went down again; and Dean Rawson shot the well. Once more he sent down a bailer to test out the hole; and Riley, touching it when it returned, found his hands dripping with blood — "devil's blood," to the superstitious foreman.

Rawson's premature elation vanished under the mystery of what followed. Steel beams disappeared in the night. From a lookout point on the mountainside, Rawson and Smithy saw figures in the dim starlight about the camp. A large casting vanished into the sand; a shot was fired by the guard Rawson had posted, and a flash of green light was the reply. On their return they found Riley, his body cut in two: the green flame, like a knife, had ripped searingly through flesh and bone.

Only one indication had come to Rawson to show him where he might find the secret of this opposition. In the top of the tallest crater he had seen a light. He believed that the power monopoly which would be crushed by his own development of electric energy had located a base in the crater and was directing the attack. To Rawson, it was an attempt to frighten off his men and halt the work.

A trip to the summit brought nothing of information. Only a forbidding expanse of ash and sand was there in the volcano's throat, choked and filled for ages past. Blowing dust in the center of the pit meant nothing until later.

Rawson watched from the top of his big derrick. He saw and fired at a figure that appeared out of the sand. A green flame flashed out, cutting the great derrick down and carrying Rawson with it.

When he regained consciousness, the men had mutinied and fled. Rawson remembered the dust at the crater top, knew that the heavy ash must have been recently disturbed, and returned, Smithy accompanying him.

He went alone to the center of the pit, which changed to a place of rushing sand. From a great rock, Rawson saw the volcano open, to become a yawning pit where red fires were shining. And out of it came strange man-shapes with throwers of green flame that slashed the stone from beneath Rawson's feet and plunged him headlong down the glassy throat of the ancient crater, toward the crimson glow below. . . .

CHAPTER VII

The Ring

"SMITHY," Rawson had called him when he found the youngster fighting gamely with death in the heat of Tonah Basin. And Gordon Smith was the name on the company records. Yet he remained always "Smithy" to Rawson, and the name, which Rawson never ceased to believe was assumed, became a mark of the affection which can spring up between man and man.

And now Smithy stood like a rigid carven statue in the midst of a barren sandy waste in the vast cup of a towering volcano top—sand that was in reality coarse pumice and ash. This was a place of death, a place where raging fires had left nothing for plant or animal life. And, over all, the desert

stars shone down coldly and added to the desolation with their own pale light.

Smithy had seen Rawson pull himself to the top of a great square-edged rock. Sensing that danger of some sort was threatening, he had started to run to the aid of the struggling man. Then came Rawson's cry.

"Back!" he shouted. "Get back, Smithy! I'm coming—"

But he did not come; and Smithy, halted by the command, was frozen to sudden, panic-stricken immobility by that which followed.

He saw the leaping things, like grotesque yellow giants. They came from the sand; then red ones leaped up from the open throat that had suddenly formed. They held flame throwers, the red ones; and the green lines of fire melted the rock from beneath Rawson's feet. All in the one second's time, it was done, and Rawson's body, his arms wide flung, was hurtling downward into the waiting throat and the threatening red glow from within. Then the carriers of the flame throwers vanished again into the pit, and there was left only a huddle of giant figures that tore at the loose sand and ash with their hands.

They threw the material in a continuous stream; the air was full of cascading sand. To Smithy they were suddenly inhuman—they were almost animals; men like moles. And they and their companions had captured Dean Rawson—sent him to his death. Slowly the watching man raised himself from the crouched position that had kept him hidden.

They were through with their work, these great yellow-skinned naked men—or mole-men. Six of them—Smithy counted them slowly before he took aim—and two were armed with flame-throwers.

Smithy rested his arm across the little hummock of gritty ash that had sheltered him and sent six flashes of flame through the night toward the cluster of bodies.

HE made no attempt to aim at each individual—the shapes were too shadowy for that. And he had no knowledge of what other weapons they might have. One thing was sure: he must take no chances on facing the red ones single-handed. He rammed his empty pistol back into its holster as he turned and ran—ran with every ounce of energy he possessed to drive his flying feet across the crater floor, out through the cleft in the rocks and down the steep mountainside.

He was stunned by the suddenness of the catastrophe that had overtaken them. The horror of Dean Rawson's going; the fearful reality of those "devils from hell" that old Riley had seen—it was all too staggering, too numbing, for easy acceptance. Time was required for the truth to sink in; and through the balance of the night Smithy had plenty of time to think.

He dared not go back to the camp where ripping flashes of green light told him the enemy was at work. And then, even had it been possible to creep up on them in the darkness, that one chance vanished as the desert about the camp sprang into view. One after another the buildings burst into flame, and Smithy was thankful for the concealment of the vast, empty desert.

THE embers were still glowing when he dared go near. This enemy, it seemed, worked only at night, and Smithy waited only for the sun to show above distant purple ranges. It had been their enemy once, that fiercely hot sun; they had fought against the heat—but never had the sun wrought such destruction as this.

Smithy looked from haggard,

hopeless eyes upon the wreckage of Rawson's camp. For the men who had worked there, this had meant only a job; to Smithy it had been a fight against the desert which had defeated him once. But to Rawson it meant the fruit of years of effort, the goal of his dreams brought almost within his reach.

Smithy looked at the smoldering heaps of gray where an idle wind puffed playfully at fluffy ash or fanned a bed of coals to flame. Twisted steel of the wrecked derrick was still further distorted; the enemy had ripped it to pieces with his stabbing flames. Even the unused materials, the steel and cement that had been neatly stacked for future use—the flames had been turned on it all.

And Smithy, though his voice broke almost boyishly from his repressed emotion, spoke aloud in solemn promise:

"It's too late to help you, Dean. I'll go back to town, report to the men who were back of you, and then. . . . They're going to pay, Dean! Whoever—whatever—they are, they're going to pay!"

He turned away toward the mountains and the ribbon of road that wound off toward the canyon. Then, at some recollection, he swung back.

"The cable's still down—he would have wanted it left all shipshape," he whispered.

Where the derrick had stood was the mouth of the twenty-inch casing. The cable that ran from it was entangled with the wreckage of the derrick, but it had not been cut. Smithy set doggedly to work.

A LITTLE gin-pole and light tackle allowed him to erect a heavier tripod of steel beams; it hoisted the big sheave block into place, and gave Smithy's two hands the strength of twenty to rig a temporary hoist. The juice was still on the main feed line, and the hoisting motors hummed at his touch. The ten miles of cable wound slowly onto the drums.

"It's nonsense, I suppose," he told himself silently. But something drove him to do this last thing—to leave it all as Rawson would have had it.

The long bailer came out at last; there was just room to hoist it clear and let it drop back upon the drilling floor. A glint of gold flashed in the sunlight as Smithy let the long metal tube down, and he broke into voluble cursing at sight of the bit of metal that was caught near the bailer's top.

The gold had started it all! That first finding of the gold on the big drill had begun it. . . . He crossed swiftly to the gleaming thing that seemed somehow to symbolize his loss.

He stooped to reach for it, intending to throw it as far as he could. Instead he stood in an awkward stooping attitude—stood so while the long uncounted minutes passed. . . .

His eyes that stared and stared in disbelief seemed suddenly to have turned traitor. They were telling him that they saw a ring—a cameo—jammed solidly into the shackle at the bailer's end. And that ring, when last he had seen it, had been on Dean Rawson's hand! Dean had caught it; he had hooked it over a lever in this very place—and now, from ten miles down inside the solid earth, it had returned. It meant—it meant. . . .

But the stocky, broad-shouldered youngster known as Smithy dared not think what it meant. Nor had he time to follow the thought; he was too busily engaged in running at suicidal speed across the hot sand toward barren mountains where a ribbon of road showed through quivering air.

CHAPTER VIII

The Darkness

DARKNESS; and red fires that seemed whirling about him as his body twisted in air. To Dean Rawson, plunging down into the volcano's maw, each second was an eternity, for, in each single instant, he was expecting crashing death.

Then he knew that long arms were wrapped about him, holding him, supporting him, checking his downward plunge . . . and at last the glassy walls, where each bulbous irregularity shone red with reflected light, moved slowly past. And, after more eons of time, a rocky floor rose slowly to meet him.

His body crashed gently; he was sprawled face downward on stone that was smooth and cold. The restraining arms no longer touched him.

He lay motionless for some time, his mind as stunned and uncomprehending as if he had truly crashed to death upon that rocky floor. Then, at last, he forced his reluctant nerves and muscles to turn his body till he lay face upward.

Darkness wrapped him as if it were the soft swathing of some black cocoon. The world about him was at first a place of utter nighttime blackness; and then, far above him, there shone a single star . . . until that feeble candle-gleam, too, was snuffed out.

A hand was gripping his shoulder; it seemed urging him to arise. He felt each separate finger—long, slender, like bands of steel. The nail at each finger-end was more nearly a claw, the whole hand a thin, clutching thing like the foot of some giant ape. And, even as he shrank involuntarily from that touch, Rawson wondered how the creature could reach out and grip him so surely in the dark. But he came to his feet in response to that urging hand.

The night was suddenly sibilant with eery, whistling voices. They came from all sides at once; they threw themselves back and forth in endless echoes. To Rawson it was only a confused medley of conflicting sounds in which no one voice was clear. But the creature that held him must have understood, for he heard him reply in a sharp, piercing tone, half whistle, half shriek.

WHAT had happened? Where was he? What was this thing that pushed him, stumbling, along through the dark? With all his tumultuous questioning he knew only one thing definitely: that it would be of no use to struggle. He was as helpless as any trapped animal.

He was inside the earth, of course; he had fallen he had no least idea how far; and, in some strange manner, this long-armed thing had supported him and eased him gently down. But what it meant or what lay ahead were matters too obscure for him to try to see clearly.

He held his hands protectingly before him while the talons gripping into his shoulder hurried him along. He stumbled awkwardly as his foot struck an obstruction. He would have fallen but for the grip that held him erect.

For that creature, whatever it was, the darkness held no uncertainty. He moved swiftly. His shrill shriek and the jerk of his arm both gave evidence of his astonishment that his captive should walk so blunderingly.

Then it seemed that he must have comprehended Rawson's blindness. A green line of light passed close behind Dean's head. It was cold—there was no radiant warmth—but, when it struck the face of a

wall of stone some twenty feet away, the solid rock turned instantly to a mass of glowing yellow-red.

The cold green ray swung back and forth, leaving a path of radiant rock behind it wherever it touched. And the rock was hot! Once the green light held more than an instant in one place, and the rock softened at its touch, then splashed and trickled down to make a fiery pool.

ABRUPTLY Rawson was able to see his surroundings. Also, he knew the source of the red glow that had seemed like volcanic fires. There had been others like his captor; they had been down below, and had played their flames upon the rocks deep in the volcano. It was thus that they made light.

With equal suddenness, and with terrible clearness, Dean found the answer to one of his questions. He wrenched himself about to stare behind him at the creature that held him in its grip. And, for the first time, the wild experience became something more than an unbelievable nightmare; in that one horrifying instant he knew it was true.

Only a few minutes before, he had been walking across the cindery sand of the crater top, walking under the stars and the dark desert sky—Dean Rawson, mining engineer, in a sane, believable world. And now. . . !

He squinted his eyes in the dim light to see more plainly the beastly figure, more horrible for being so nearly human. He had seen them briefly up above; the closer view of this one specimen of a strange race was no more pleasing. For now he saw clearly the cruelty in the face. It was there unmistakably, even though the face itself, under less threatening circumstances, might have been a ludicrous caricature of a man's.

Red and nearly naked, the creature stood upright, straps of metal about its body. It was about Rawson's height; its round, staring eyes were about level with his own, and each eye was centered in a circular disk of whitish skin. The light went dim for a moment, and Dean, staring in his turn, saw those other huge eyes enlarge, the white covering of each drawing back like an expanding iris.

Some vague understanding came to him of the beast's ability to see in the dark. They used these red-hot stones for illumination, but this thing had seemed to see clearly even when the stones had ceased to glow. And again, though indistinctly, Dean knew that those eyes might be sensitive to infra-red radiations—they might see plainly by the dark light that continued to flood these rocky chambers, though, to him, the rocks had gone lightless and black.

EVEN as the quick thoughts flashed through his mind, he was thinking other thoughts, recording other observations.

The rest of the face was red like the body; the head was sharply pointed, and crowned with a mass of thin, clinging locks of hair. The mouth, a round, lipless orifice, contracted or dilated at will; from it came whistling words.

Out of the darkness, giant things were leaping. They clutched at Rawson, while the first captor released his hold and drew back. Taller, these newcomers were, bigger, and different.

In the red light from the hot rocks Dean saw their faces, in which were owl eyes like those of the first one, but yellow, expressionless and stupid. Their great bodies were yellow; their outstretched hands were webbed.

For one instant, as Rawson's hand touched his pistol in its hol-

ster, a surge of fighting rage swept through him. His whole being was in a spasm of revolt against all this series of happenings that had trapped him; he wanted to lash out regardless of consequences. Then cooler judgment came to his aid.

Other figures, with faces red and ugly, expressive of nameless evil, were gathered beside the one who still played the jet of cold fire upon the walls. Like him they were naked save for a cloth at the waist and the metal straps encircling their bodies. They, too, had flame-throwers—he saw the long metal jets and their lava tips. Yet the temptation to fire into that group as fast as he could pull trigger was strong upon him.

Instead he allowed these other giant things to grip him with their webbed hands and lead him away.

THE wavering light had shown many passages through the rock. Glazed, all of them. Either they had been blown through molten rock which had then solidified to give the glassy surfaces, or else —and this seemed more likely— the flame-throwers had done it. Rawson, scanning the labyrinth for some recognizable strata, had a quick vision of these caverns being cut out and enlarged, and of their walls melted just as they were being melted now—melted and hardened again innumerable times by succeeding generations of red- and yellow-skinned men.

Yes, they were men. He admitted this while he walked unresistingly between two of the giants. Another went before them and lighted the way with the green ray of a flame-thrower on the melting rock. These were men—men of a different sort. Evolution, working strange changes underground, had made them half beasts, diggers in the dark, mole-men!

They were passing through a long tunnel that went steadily down. Cross passages loomed blackly; ahead of them the leader was throwing his flame upon the walls of a great vault.

Rawson had ceased to take note of their movements. What use to remember? He could never escape, never retrace his steps.

He tried to whip up a faint flicker of hope at thought of Smithy. Smithy had seen him go, had seen the red mole-men, of course. And he had got away—he must have got away! He would go for help. . . .

But, at that, he groaned inwardly. Smithy would go for help, and then what? He would be laughed out of any sheriff's office; he would be locked up as insane if he persisted. Why should he persist—for that matter, why should he go at all? Smithy would not believe for a single minute that Rawson was still alive.

HIS thoughts ended. Webbed hands, wrapped tightly about his arms, were thrusting him forward into a great room. The green flame had been snapped off. One last hot circle on the high wall showed only a dull red. But before it faded, Dean saw dimly the outlines of a tremendous cavern. He saw also that these walls were unglazed, raw; they had never been melted.

Below the rough and shattered sides heaps of fragments were piled about the room.

Fleetingly he saw the shadowed details; then darkness swallowed even that little he had seen. Clanging metal told of a closing door; a line of red outlined it for an instant to show where it was welded fast. He was a prisoner in a cell whose walls were the living rock.

For a long time he stood motionless, while the heavy darkness pressed heavily in upon his swim-

ming senses; he sank slowly to the floor at last. He was numbed, and his mind was as blank as the black nothingness that spread before his staring eyes. In a condition almost of coma, he had no measure or count of the hours that passed.

Then a fever of impatience possessed him; his thoughts, springing suddenly to life, were too wildly improbable for any sane mind, were driving him mad. He forced himself to move cautiously.

ON the floor he had seen burnished gold, shining dully as he entered. There had been a thick vein of yellow in the rock. The floor, at that place, was rough beneath his feet, as if the hot metal had been spilled.

His hands groped before him as he remembered the heaps of rock fragments. Then his feet found one of them stumblingly, and he turned and moved to one side. He remembered having seen a dim shape off there that had made a straight slanting line. His searching hands encountered the object and kept him from walking into it.

The feeling of helplessness that drove him was only being increased by his blind and blundering movements. He told himself that he must wait.

Silently he stood where he had come to a stop, hands resting on the object that barred his way—until suddenly, stiflingly, his breath caught in his throat. Some emotion, almost too great to be borne, was suffocating him.

Slowly he moved his hands. Inch by inch he felt his way around the smooth cylinder, so hard, so coldly metallic. Then, with a rush, he let his hands follow up the slanting thing, up to a rounded top, to a heavy ring and a shackle that was on the end of a cable, thin and taut. And, while his hands explored it feverishly, the metal moved!

HE clung to the smooth roundness as it slipped through his hands. It was the bailer, part of his own equipment. That slender cable reached up, straight up to the world he knew. And Smithy was there—Smithy was hoisting it!

He clung to the cylinder desperately. The bore, at this depth, had been reduced to eight inches; the bailer fitted it loosely. And Rawson cursed frantically the narrow space that would let this inanimate object return but would hold him back, while he wrapped his arms about the cold surface of the metal messenger from another world.

It lifted clear, then settled back. This time it dropped noisily to the floor. And suddenly Dean was tearing at the ring on one of the swollen fingers of his left hand.

It came free at last; it was in his hand as the cable tightened again. Swiftly, surely, he worked in the darkness to jam the ring through the shackle at the bailer's top. Then the bailer lifted, clanged loudly as it entered the shattered bore in the rocks above, and scraped noisily at the sides. The sound rose to a rasping shriek that went fainter and still fainter till it dwindled into silence.

But Dean Rawson, standing motionless in the darkness of that buried vault, dared once more to let himself think and *feel* as he stared blindly upward.

Up there Smithy was waiting. Smithy would know. And with Smithy fighting from the outside and he, Rawson, putting up a scrap below. . . . He smiled almost happily as his hand rested upon his gun.

Hopeless? Of course it was hopeless. No use of really kidding himself—he didn't have the chance of a pink-eyed rabbit.

But he was still smiling toward that dark roof overhead as the outlines of a metal door grew cherry

red. They were coming for him! He was ready to meet whatever lay ahead. . . .

CHAPTER IX

A Subterranean World

THE metal plate that had sealed him in this tomb fell open with a crash. Beyond it the passageway was alive with crowding red figures. Above their heads the nozzles of a score of flame-throwers spat jets of green fire. Rawson drew back in sudden uncontrollable horror as they came crowding into the room.

The familiar feel of the bailer's cold metal had given him a momentary sense of oneness with his own world. Now this inrush of hideous, demoniac figures beneath the flare of green flames was like a fevered vision of the infernal regions come suddenly to actuality.

Rawson retreated to the shattered, rocky wall and prepared for one last fight, until he realized that the evil black eyes in their ghastly circles of white skin were fixed upon him more in curiosity than in active hatred.

They formed a semicircle about him—a wall of red bodies, whose pointed heads were craned forward, while an excited chatter in their broken, whistling speech filled the room with shrill clamor. Then one of them pointed above toward the open shaft that Rawson had drilled, the shaft up which the bailer had gone. And again their voices rose in weird discord, while their long arms waved, and red, lean-fingered hands pointed.

Only a moment of this, then one of them gave an order. Two of the red figures came toward Rawson where he was waiting. They were unarmed. They motioned that he was to go with them. And Dean, with a helpless shrug of his shoulders, allowed them, one on each side, to take him by the arms and hurry him through the open door. Two others went ahead, the green jets of flame from their weapons lighting the passage.

The system of communicating tunnels seemed at first only the vents and blow-holes from some previous volcanic activity. And yet, at times they gave place to more regular arrangement that plainly was artificial. The air in them was pure, though odorous with a pungent tang which Dean could not identify. Through some of the passages it blew gently with uncomfortable warmth.

The guard of wild red figures hurried him along through a vast world of caverns and winding passages which seemed one great mine. The richness of it was amazing. Dean Rawson was a man, a human being, facing death in some form which he could not yet know, and, so fast had his wild experiences crowded in upon him, he seemed numbed to all normal emotions; yet through it all the mind of the engineer was at work, and Dean's eyes were flashing from side to side, trying to see and understand the ever-changing panorama of a subterranean world.

MOLE-MEN, both red and yellow, were everywhere. But it was apparent at a glance that the yellow giants were a race of toilers—slaves, driven by the reds.

Their great bodies glowed orange-colored with the reflected heat of the blasts of flame used to melt the metals from their ores. Gold and silver, other metals that Rawson could not distinguish in the half light—the glow of the molten stuff came from every distant cave that the passages opened up.

The sheer marvel of it overwhelmed him. His own danger, even the death that waited for him, were forgotten.

A world within a world—and who knew how far it extended? Mole-men, by scores and hundreds, the denizens of a great subterranean world, of which his own world had been in ignorance. Here was civilization of a sort, and now the barriers that had separated this world from the world above had been broken down; the two were united. Suddenly there came to Rawson's mind a flashing comprehension of a menace wild and terrible that had come with the breaking of those barriers.

They were passing through a wider hall when the whistling chatter of Dean's escort ceased. They were looking to one side where a cloud of smoke had rolled from a slope beyond. One of the red figures staggered, choking, from the cloud. Two yellow mole-men followed closely after.

The red mole-man was unarmed; each yellow one had a flame-thrower that was now so familiar a sight to Dean. His own escort was silent; they had halted, watching those others expectantly.

IN the silence of that rocky room the single red one whistled an order. One of the two yellow men placed his weapon on the floor. Another shrill order followed, and the remaining worker, without a moment's hesitation, turned the green blast of his own projector upon his comrade.

It was done in a second—a second in which the giant's shriek ended in a flash of flame for which his own flesh was the fuel. A wisp of drifting smoke, and that was all. And the red creatures who had Rawson in their charge, after a moment of silence, filled the room with shrill-voiced pandemonium, while they shrieked their approval of the spectacle.

But Dean Rawson's lips were forming half-whispered words, so intently was he thinking the thoughts. "The damned red beast! That poor devil's flame hit some sulphur, I suppose—burned it to SO_2—then he got his!"

But, even while he searched his mind for words to describe the evil of this red race, he was realizing another fact. These yellow giants, countless thousands of them, perhaps, were held in subjection by their red masters. They would do as they were told. Dimly, vaguely, through his horrified mind, came the picture of a horde of red and yellow beasts turned loose upon the world above.

There were fears now which filled Dean Rawson, shook him with horrors as yet only half comprehended. But the fears were not for himself, one solitary man in the grip of these red beasts—he was fearing for all mankind.

HIS guard was hurrying him on, but now Dean hardly saw the scenes of feverish activity through which they passed. Another thought had come to him.

That shaft, the hole which he himself had drilled—what damage had it done? It was he who had broken down the barriers. His drill had told these beasts that there was other life above. It had guided them. They had realized that they were near to some other place where men worked and drove tunnels through the rocks. They had followed up these forgotten passages that led to the old craters, had ascended inside the volcano, made their way through the top and emerged into another world—a clean and sunlit world.

Now Rawson's eyes found with new understanding the activity about him.

The mining operations had been left behind. Here were branching passages, great cavelike rooms—a world within a world, in all truth.

Throughout it, demoniac figures were hurrying, driving thousands of giant yellow slaves where the light shone sparkling from innumerable heaps of metal weapons—flame-throwers and others, the nature of which Rawson could not determine. And everywhere was the shouting and hurry as of a nation in the throes of war.

His speculations ended abruptly. They were approaching a room, a vast open place. High on the farther wall was a recess in the rock in which tongues of flame licked hungrily upward. The heat of the fires struck down in a ceaseless hot blast. Close to the fires, unmindful of the heat, a barbaric figure assumed grotesque and horrible postures, while its voice rose in echoing shrillness.

Below were crowding red ones who prostrated themselves on the rocky floor.

"Fire worshipers!" The explanatory thought flashed through Dean Rawson's mind. "Here was one of their holy places, a place of sacrifice, perhaps, and he was being taken there, helpless, a captive!

CHAPTER X

Plumb Loco

THE sheriff of Cocos County was reacting exactly as Rawson had anticipated. Smithy stood before him, a disheveled Smithy, grimy of face and hands. He had made his way to the highway and caught a ride to the nearest town, and now that he had found Jack Downer, sheriff, that gentleman leaned back in his old chair behind the battered desk and regarded the younger man with amused tolerance.

"Now, that's right interesting, what you say," he admitted. "Tonah Basin, and the old crater, and red devils settin' fire to everything. I've heard some wild ones since this Prohibition went into effect and some of the boys started makin' their own, but yours sure beats 'em all. Guess likely I'll have to take a run up Tonah way and see what kind of cactus liquor they're makin'."

"Meaning I'm drunk or a liar." Smithy's voice was hot with sudden anger, but the sheriff regarded him imperturbably.

"Well, I'd let you off on one count, son. You do look sort of sober."

Smithy disregarded the plain implication and fought down the anger that possessed him.

"May I use your phone, Mr. Downer?" he asked.

He called the office of Erickson and his associates in Los Angeles and told, as well as he could for the constant interruptions from his listener, the story of what had occurred. And Mr. Erickson at the other end of the line, although he used different words, gave somewhat the same reply as had the sheriff.

"I refuse to listen to any more such wild talk," he said. "If our property has been destroyed, as you say, there will be an accounting, you may be sure of that. And now, Mr. Smith, get this straight, you tell Rawson, wherever he is hiding, to come and see me at once."

"But I tell you he has been captured," said Smithy desperately. "He's gone."

"I rather think we will find him," was the reply. "He had better come of his own accord. His connection with us will be severed and all drilling operations in Tonah Basin will be discontinued, but Mr. Rawson will find that his responsibility is not so easily evaded."

The sheriff could not have failed to realize the unsatisfactory nature of the conversation; he must have wondered at the satisfied grin that spread across Smithy's tired face.

"Do you mean you're through?" he demanded. "You're abandoning Rawson's work?"

"Exactly," was Mr. Erickson's crisp response.

SMITHY, as the telephone clicked in his ear, turned again to the sheriff. "That unties my hands," he said cryptically. "One more call, if you please."

Then to the operator: "Get me the offices of the Mountain Power and Lighting Corporation in San Francisco. I will talk with the president."

The sheriff of Cocos County chuckled audibly. "You'll talk to the president's sixteenth assistant secretary, son," he told Smithy. "And I take back what I said before—now I know you're plumb loco. By the way, son, it costs money for telephone calls like that. I hope you ain't, by any chance, overlookin'—"

But Smithy was speaking into the telephone unmindful of the sheriff's remarks.

"Is Mr. Smith in his office?" he was inquiring "Yes, President Smith. . . . Would you connect me with him at once, please? This is Gordon Smith talking."

"Hello, Dad," he said a moment later. "Yes, that's right. It's the prodigal himself. Now, listen, Dad, here's something important. Can you meet me in Sacramento and arrange for us to see the Governor—get his private, confidential ear? I'll beat it for Los Angeles—charter the fastest plane they've got. . . ."

There was more to the conversation, much more, although Smithy refrained from giving details over the phone. An operator was breaking in on the conversation as he was about to hang up.

"Emergency call," the young woman's voice was saying. "We must have the line at once."

SMITHY handed the telephone to the sheriff. "Someone's anxious to talk to you," he said. He searched his pockets hurriedly, found a ten-dollar bill which he laid on the sheriff's desk. "That will cover it," he said with a new note in his voice. "Perhaps you're not just the man for this job, sheriff. It's going to be a whole lot too hot for you to handle."

He had turned quickly toward the door, but something in the sheriff's excited voice checked him. "Burned? Wiped out, you say?"

Halfway across the room Smithy could hear another hoarse voice in the telephone. The sheriff repeated the words. "Red devils! They wasn't Injuns? The whole town of Seven Palms destroyed!"

"I thought," said Smithy softly to himself, "that we'd have to go down *there* to find *them,* and instead they're out looking for us. Yes, I think this will be decidedly too hot for you to handle, sheriff." He turned and bolted out the door.

AN attentive audience was awaiting Gordon Smith on his arrival in Sacramento. Smithy's father was not one to be kept waiting even by the Governor of the state. Also, Smithy was coming from the Tonah Basin region, and the news of the destruction of the desert town of Seven Palms had preceded him. Even the swift planes of the Coastal Service could not match the speed of the radio news.

There were only two men in the room when Smithy entered. One of them, tall, heavily built, as square-shouldered as Smithy, came forward and put his two hands on the young man's shoulders. Their greetings were brief.

"Well, son?" asked the older man, and packed a world of questioning into the interrogation.

"O. K., Dad," said Smithy simply.

His father nodded silently and turned to the other man. "Governor, my son, Gordon. He got tired of being known as the 'Old Man's son'—started out on his own—not looking for adventure exactly, but I judge he has found it. He's got something to tell us."

And again Smithy told his wild, unbelievable tale. But it was not so incredible now, for, even while Smithy was talking, the Governor was glancing at the report on his desk which told of the destruction of the little town of Seven Palms.

"I can't tell you what it means," Smithy concluded. He paused before venturing a prediction which was to prove remarkably accurate. "But I saw them—I saw them come up out of the earth, and I'm betting there are plenty more where they came from. And now that they've found their way out, we've got a scrap on our hands. And don't think they're not fighters, either. They're armed—those flame-throwers are nothing we can laugh off, and what else they've got, we don't know."

He leaned forward earnestly across the Governor's desk. "But that's your job," he said. "Mine is to find Dean Rawson. He's alive, or he was. He sent up his ring as proof of it. I've got to find him—I've got to go down in that pit and I want your help."

CHAPTER XI

The White-Hot Pit

HOW far his guard of wild, red man-things had taken him Dean Rawson could not know. Many miles, it must have been. And he knew that the air had grown steadily more stiflingly hot. But the heat of those long tunneled passages was like a cool breeze compared with the blasting breath of the room into which he was plunged.

It seared his eyeballs; it struck down from the tongues of flame that played in red fury in the recess high up on the farther wall. And the vast room, the fires, the hundreds of kneeling figures, all blurred and swam dizzily before him.

The hot air that he breathed seemed crisping his lungs. Vaguely, for the stupefying, brain-numbing heat, he wondered at the figure he saw dimly in its grotesque posturing close to the flames. And the hundreds of others—how could they live? How could he himself go on living in this inferno?

They had been chanting in unison, the kneeling red ones. Dean heard the regular beat of their repeated words change to an uproar of shrill, whistling voices. But he could neither see nor hear plainly for the unbearable, suffocating heat.

The clamor was deafening, confusing; it echoed tremendously in the rocky room and mingled with the steady, continuous roar of the flames. The mass of bodies that surged about him made only a blurring impression; he tried to make himself see clearly. He must fight—fight to the last! Only this thought persisted. He was striking out blindly when he knew that his red guard had cleared a way through the mob and was dragging him forward.

He knew when they reached the farther wall. Somewhere above him was the deep-cut niche in which the fires roared. And then, when again he could see from his tortured eyes, he found directly ahead another doorway in the solid rock. Beyond it all was black; it gave promise of coolness, of relief from the stifling air of the room. Red hands were thrusting him through.

The burst of water, icy cold, that descended upon him from above shocked him from the stupor that claimed his senses. He was

drenched in an instant, strangling and gasping for breath. But he could think! And, as the lean hands seized him again and hurried him forward, he almost dared to hope.

TO his eyes the passageway was a place of utter darkness, but the red ones, their great owl eyes opened wide, hurried him on. His stumbling feet encountered a flight of steps. With the red guard he climbed a winding stair where the tunnel twisted upward.

That icy deluge had set every nerve aquiver with new life. He hardly dared ask himself what might lie ahead. Yet he had been saved from that mob; it might be his life would be spared, that in some way he could learn to communicate with these people, learn more of this subterranean world—which must be of tremendous extent. Without any sure knowledge of their plans, he still was certain in his own mind that they intended to swarm out upon the upper world. He might even be able to show them the folly of that.

A thousand thoughts were flashing through his mind when the tunnel ended. Beyond a square-cut opening the air was aglow with red. An ominous thunder was in his ears. Then a score of hands lifted him bodily and threw him out upon a rocky floor that burned his hands as he fell.

Heat, blistering, unbearable, beat upon him. He was wrapped in quick-rising clouds of steam from his wet clothes.

The platform ended. Far below was a sea of red faces, grotesque and horrible, where each held two ghastly white disks, and at the center of each disk a mere pinpoint eye.

He saw it all in the instant of his falling—the inhuman, shrieking mob, the blast of hot flame not forty feet away at the back of the rocky niche, and, between himself and the flame, a giant figure that leaped exultantly, while its body, that appeared carved from metallic copper, reflected the red fires until it seemed itself afiame.

DEAN knew in the fraction of a second while he scrambled to his feet, that the great room had gone silent. The roaring of the flames ceased; even the clamor of shrill voices was stilled. He had thrown one arm across his face to shield his eyes; the heat still poured upon him like liquid fire. But his instant decision to throw himself out and down into the waiting mob was checked by the sudden stillness.

To open his eyes wide meant impossible torture, yet he forced himself to peer through slitted lids beneath the shelter of his arm.

The flame was gone. Where it had been was a wall of shimmering red rock above a gaping throat in the floor, whose rim was quivering white with heat. Here the blast from some volcanic depth had come.

Then he saw it, saw the great coppery figure leaping upon him—and saw more plainly than all this the end that had been prepared for him.

Fire worshipers! Demons of an under world paying tribute to their god. And he, Dean Rawson, was to be a living sacrifice, cast headlong to that waiting, white-hot throat!

The coppery giant was upon him in the instant of his realization. Somehow in that moment Dean Rawson's wracked body passed beyond all pain. With the inhuman, maniacal strength of a man driven beyond all reason and restraint he tore himself half free from those encircling arms and drove blow after blow into the hideous face above him.

Only his left arm was free. That, too, was clamped tightly against his body an instant later.

THE giant had been between him and the glowing rocks. Now he felt himself whirled in air, and again the blast of heat struck upon him. He was being rushed backward; and there flashed through his mind, as plainly as if he could actually see it, the scintillant whiteness of that hungry throat.

He tried to lock his legs about the big body to prevent that final heave and throw that would end a ghastly ceremony. The rocks were close, their radiant heat wrapped about him like a living flame. Abruptly his strength was gone—the fight was over—he had lost! His heart sent the blood pounding and thundering to his brain; his lungs seemed on fire.

THE high priest of the red ones had his priestly duty to perform—the sacrifice must be offered. But even the high priest, it would seem, must have been not above personal resentment. Sacrilege had been done—a fist had smashed again and again into the holy one's face. This it must have been that made him pause, that brought one big hand up in a grip of animal rage about Dean's throat.

Only a moment—a matter of seconds—while he vented his fury upon this white-skinned man who had dared to oppose him. Dean felt the hand close about his throat. So limp he was, so drained of strength, he made no effort to tear it loose. He was *dead*—what mattered a few seconds more or less of life? And then a thrill shot through him as he knew his right hand was free.

That hand made fumbling work of drawing a gun from its smoking, leather holster. He could hardly control the numbed, blistered fingers, yet somehow he crooked one about the trigger; and dimly, as from some great distance, he heard the roar of the forty-five. . . . Then, from some deep recess within him, he summoned one last ounce of strength that threw him clear of the falling body.

Instinctively he had heaved himself away from the fiery rocks; the same effort had sent his big coppery antagonist staggering, stumbling, backward. And Dean, sprawled on the stone floor, whose heat where he lay was just short of redness, heard one long, despairing shriek as the giant figure wavered, hung in air for a moment in black outline against the fierce red of a rocky wall above a white-hot pit, then toppled, pitched forward, and vanished.

Sick and giddy, he forced himself to draw his body up on hands and knees. Then he straightened, came to his feet, and staggered forward.

BELOW him was pandemonium. The sea of faces wavered and blurred before his eyes. From a distant archway other figures were coming. He saw the gleam of metal, heard the wild blare of trumpets, and knew that the hundreds of red ones below him were standing stiffly, both hands raised upright in salute as another barbaric figure entered. The air was clamorous with a shrill repeated call. "Phee-e-al!" the red ones shrieked. "Phee-e-al!"

But Rawson did not wait to see more. Behind him, the flames that had been fed with human flesh—if indeed these red ones were human—roared again into life. He had returned the pistol to its holster when first he came to his feet; his weak hands had seemed unable to hold it. And now his two hands were thrust outward before him as he staggered blindly toward the tunnel mouth.

It was where he had emerged upon the platform. His reaching hands found the side entrance

where the stairs led down to the main hall. In the darkness he made his way past. Stumbling weakly he pushed on down the long tunnel whose floor slanted gently away.

Ahead of him was a light. The comparative coolness of these rocks had served to revive him somewhat. He had no hope of escape, yet the light seemed comforting, somehow.

He stopped. His stinging eyes were wide open. He stared incredulously at the glowing spot on a distant wall, where a flame must have touched, and at the figure beneath it.

The figure of a woman! A young woman, tall, slender, fair-haired, whose skin was white, a creamy white, whiter than snow.

A woman? It was a mere girl, slender and beautiful, her graceful young body poised as if, in quick flight, she had been caught and held for a moment of stillness.

What was she doing here? His exhausted brain could not comprehend what it meant. He had seen women of the Mole-men tribe mingling with the men. Like them their heads were pointed, their faces grotesque and hideous. Rawson gave an inarticulate cry of amazement and staggered forward.

Between him and the distant figure a crowd of Reds swarmed in. They came from a connecting passage. Above their heads the lava tips of flame-throwers were spitting jets of green fire. Every face was turned toward him at his cry.

Beyond them the white figure vanished. Dean, leaning weakly against the wall, told himself dully that it had been a phantom, a product of his own despairing brain and his own weakness. Then that weakness overcame him; and the red Mole-men, their white and hideous eyes, the threatening jets of green flame, all vanished in the quick darkness that swept over him. . . .

CHAPTER XII

Dreams

THE black curtain of unconsciousness which descended so quickly upon Rawson was not easily thrown off. For hours, days or weeks—he never knew how long he lay in the citadel of the Reds—it was to wrap him around.

Nor was his waking a matter of a moment. Many and varied were the impressions which came to him in times of semiconsciousness, and which of them were realities and which dreams, he could not tell.

He was being tortured with knives, lances tipped with pain that dragged him up from the black depths in which he lay. Dimly he realized that his clothes were being stripped from him and that the piercing knives were none the less real for being only the touch of hands and rough cloth upon his blistered body. Then from head to foot he was coated with a substance cool and moist. The pain died to a mere throbbing and again he felt himself sinking back into unconsciousness.

There were other visions, many others, some of them plain and distinct, some blurred and terrifying to his fevered brain trying vainly to bring order and reason into what was utterly chaotic.

Once a bedlam of shrieking voices roused him. He tried to open his eyes, whose lids were too heavy for his strength. And by that he knew he was dreaming. Yet from under those lowered lids he seemed to see a wild medley of red warriors, their faces blotched and ghastly in the green light of their weapons. They were carrying a charred body which they threw heavily upon the floor beside him as if to compare the two. He saw the face which the flames had not touched, the face of Jack Downer—Downer, the sheriff of Cocos Coun-

ty. His sandy hair had been scorched to the scalp.

Dreams . . . and the steady beat of metal-shod feet of marching men. He saw them passing some distance away. The repeated *thud-thud* of metal on stone echoed maddeningly through his brain for hours. . . . Dreams, all of them.

And once there came to him a vision which beyond all doubt was unreal.

SILENCE had surrounded him. For what seemed hours no one of the red mole-men had come near. And then, in the silence, he heard whisperings and the sound of stealthy feet; and, for a moment, the same white figure that had met him in his flight stood where he could see.

Only the merest trace of dim light relieved the utter darkness of the room. The girl's figure was ghostly, unreal. Yet he saw the dull sparkle of jeweled breast-plates against her creamy white skin. Loose folds of cloth were gathered about her waist; her golden hair was drawn back except for vagrant curls that only accentuated the perfect oval of her face.

There were others with her, dim shapes of men; how many Rawson could not tell. They looked down at him, whispering softly, excitedly, amongst themselves; but their words were like nothing he had ever heard.

For an instant Dean felt his stupefied mind coming almost to wakefulness. Phantom figures, ghostly and unreal—but the faces were human, and the eyes looked down upon him pityingly. He tried to rouse himself, tried to call out, then settled limply back, for the girl was speaking—or he was catching her thoughts. It seemed almost that he heard her whispered words:

"They take him to *Gevarro,* to the Lake of Fire which never dies! Gor told me—he overheard their plans. But, by the Mountain I swear. . . ." Then footsteps echoed in a far-off passage, and the white ones vanished like drifting smoke.

Dreams, all of them. Yet the time came when Dean knew that he was awake—knew too that further experiences awaited him in this demoniac land.

AGAIN red guards came. The wicked breath of their weapons filled the great room where Rawson had been with green, flickering light. Dean, dragged to his feet, was unable to stand. One of the giant yellow workers came forward at a whistled order and held him erect. Another brought a bowl carved from rock crystal and filled with a liquid golden-green with reflected light. He put it to Rawson's lips and with the first touch Dean knew that he must have been filled with a burning thirst beyond anything he had ever known. He gulped greedily at the liquid, drained the bowl to the last drop, then marveled at the thrilling fire of strength that flowed through him.

"Wine," he thought, "wine of the gods—or devils." He came to himself with a start. He knew that he was naked and that his body was encased in a coating of stiff gray plaster. It was this that prevented his arms and legs from flexing.

Another order and the giant worker picked him up in his arms and carried him where the others led to a distant room. A stream trickled through a cut in the rocky floor. At the center of the room was a pool. Unable to resist, Dean felt the giant arms toss him out and down.

The water was warm. At its first touch the hard plaster melted like snow. Sputtering and choking for breath, Rawson came to the surface. He found he could move freely,

then reaching hands hauled him out upon the floor, and through all his dread he found time to marvel at his own firm muscles and the healthy white of his skin that had been seared and blistered.

He obeyed when the red guards pointed and motioned him into a dark passageway. He tried to keep up with them as they hurried him on. Evidently his pace was too slow, for again the big worker picked him up, swung him into the air and seated him firmly on one broad shoulder, and, with red guards ahead and behind them, hurried on.

To find himself a child in the hands of this big yellow man was disconcerting. To be calmly lugged off was almost humiliating. No one who was not a good sport could have grinned as Rawson did at his own predicament.

"Not exactly a triumphal procession," he told himself, then his lips set grimly. "They've got my gun," he thought, "and now, whatever comes, all I can do is stand and take it. Still, they've saved my life. But what for?"

ALWAYS the way led downward, and Rawson, perched on his strange, half-human steed, let his gaze follow up every branching tunnel and widespread cave. Not all of these were as dark as the broad thoroughfare they followed. In some, strange lights glowed, and Rawson saw weird, towering plant growths that yellow workers were harvesting.

Life, life, everywhere, and seemingly this underground world was endless.

Troops of red warriors passed them, upward bound. The dancing flames of their weapons, where occasional ones were in action, glowed from afar. They bobbed and waved like green fireflies as the Mole-men came on at a half-run.

"And this means trouble up top," he thought. "There's going to be hell to pay up there."

But workers, fighters, everyone they met stood aside to let the red guard pass. Again Rawson heard the strange word or call that had come to him in the temple of fire. One of the guides would give a whistling call that ended in the same strange shrill cry of "Phee-e-al," and instantly the way was cleared.

A wild journey, incredible, unreal. Rawson, as he met the countless staring white eyes of the creatures they passed, found his thoughts wandering. He had had wild dreams. Surely this was only another in that succession of phantom pictures. Then, seeing the cold, implacable hatred in those staring eyes, he would be brought back with sickening abruptness to a full knowledge of his own hopeless situation.

"Gevarro, the lake of fire which never dies"—what was it the white ones had said? But no, that certainly was a dream like that other in which he had seemed to see the charred body of a man, the sheriff who had called to see him at his camp in Tonah Basin.

Dreams—reality—his brain was confused with the wild kaleidoscope of unbelievable pictures.

HE was suddenly aware that through it all he had been mentally tabulating their route, remembering the outstanding features when there was light enough to see. He knew that unconsciously his mind had been thinking of escape. Wilder than all the other visions, he had been picturing himself retracing his route, alone, free. He did not know that he had laughed aloud, harshly, hopelessly, until he saw the curious eyes of his red guard upon him.

"Yes," he told himself in silent

bitterness, "I could find my way back, if. . . ."

The guard had swung off from the great tunnel which must have been one of the main thoroughfares of the Mole-men's world. They crowded through a narrower passage and again Rawson found himself in one of the great, high-ceilinged caves like the others he had seen. But unlike the others this was brightly lighted.

Massive limestone formation. His eyes squinted against the glare and caught the character of the rock before he was able to distinguish details, and in the black limestone big disks of gray mineral had been set. Jets of flame played upon them and turned them to blazing, brilliant white.

The big yellow Mole-man who had carried him dropped him roughly to the floor and backed away. About him the red guard was grouped. Rawson caught a glimpse of hundreds of other thronging figures. The crowd about him separated. A space was cleared between him and the farther end of the room, a lane lined on either side by solid masses of savage Reds. And beyond them, more barbaric than any figure in the foreground, was another group.

ACROSS the full width of the room a low wall was raised three or four feet from the floor. It was capped with rude carvings. The whole mass gleamed dully golden in the bright light. Beyond the wall in semicircular formation, resembling a grouping of bronze statues, were men like the one with whom Rawson had fought. Priests, tenders of the fires. He knew in an instant that here were more of the red one's holy men. They stood erect, unmoving. At their center was another seated man-shape that might have been cast from solid gold.

His naked body was yellow and glittering, contrasting strongly with the black metal straps like those the warriors wore. On his head a round, sharply-pointed cap was ablaze with precious stones.

Rawson took it all in in one quick glance. He knew that those copper bodies were not encased in metal, for the flesh of the one he had fought with had sunk under his blows. Their skin was coated with a preparation, heat resistant without a doubt, and the golden one must have been treated in somewhat the same way.

His thoughts flashed quickly over this. It was the face of that seated figure that riveted his attention, a white face, milk-white, so white it seemed almost chalky!

FOR one breathless second Rawson was filled with a wordless hope. Those white ones of his dream had looked upon him with kindly eyes. They were human—men of another race, but men. Then beneath the chalky whiteness of the face he found the hideous features of the red Mole-men, and knew that the white color of the face was as false as that of the golden body.

But he was their leader. He was someone of importance. Rawson had started forward impetuously when he saw the figure rise. At the first motion the hands of every red one in the room were flung in air. They stood stiffly at salute. Even the priests' coppery arms flashed upward. And "Phee-e-al!" a thousand shrill voices were shouting. "Phee-e-al! Phee-e-al!"

Rawson stopped, then walked slowly forward, one defenseless, naked man of the upper world, between two living walls formed by men of a hidden race.

"Phee-e-al," he was thinking. "He's the one I saw coming into their temple back there. They got

out of our way when they knew we were coming to see him. He's the big boss here, all right."

He did not pause in his steady, forward progress until his hands were resting upon the golden barrier. Strange thoughts were racing through his mind. Phee-e-al, he was facing Phee-e-al, king of a kingdom ten miles or more beneath the surface of the earth, a place of devils more real and terrible than any that mythology had dared depict. And he, Dean Rawson, a man, just one of the millions like him up there in a sane, civilized world, was down here, standing at a barrier of gold before a tribunal that knew nothing of justice or mercy.

THOUGHTS of communicating with them had mingled with other half-formed plans in his racing mind. Sign language—he had talked with the Indians; he might be able to get some ideas across. He met the other's fierce scrutiny fearlessly, then, waiting for him to make the first advance, let his gaze dart about at closer range. He could not restrain a start of surprise at sight of his own clothing, his pocket radio receiver and his pistol spread out on a metal stand.

They had been curious about them. Rawson took that as a good sign. Perhaps he had been mistaken in his interpretation of what he had seen. For himself, he could have no real hope, but it might be that the outpouring of these demons into his own world was a threat that lay only in his own imagination.

His eyes came back to meet that gaze which had never left him. The eyes were mere dots of jet in a white and repulsive face. The rounded mouth opened to emit a shrill whistled order.

In the utter silence of the great room one of the copper-skinned priests moved swiftly toward the rear. There were chests there, massive metal things afire with the brilliance of inlaid jewels. The priest flung one of them open with a resounding clang.

The room had been warm, and the chill which abruptly froze Rawson's muscles to hard rigidity came from within himself. Dreams! He had thought them dreams, those marching thousands, and the others who returned. He had dared to hope he might avert an invasion by this inhuman horde.

And now he knew his worst imaginings were far short of the truth. He saw clearly his own fate. For the priest returning was holding an object aloft, a horrible thing, a naked body, scorched and charred. And above it a head lopped awkwardly. The hair was sandy; half of it had been burned to the scalp in a withering flame. Below, staring from sightless eyes, was the face of the man who had once been sheriff of Cocos County.

CHAPTER XIII

"N-73 Clear!"

"YOU fly, of course?" demanded Governor Drake.

Smithy nodded. "Unlimited license—all levels."

They had spent the night in the executive mansion, and now the Governor had burst precipitately into the room where Smithy and his father had just finished dressing. The two had been deep in an earnest conversation which the Governor's entrance had interrupted.

"I am drafting you for service," said the Governor. "I want you to go out to Field Number Three. A fast scout plane—National Guard equipment—will be ready for you—"

He broke off and stared doubtfully at a paper in his hand, a radiophone mesage, Smithy judged. "I'm in a devil of a fix," the Gover-

nor exclaimed, after a pause. Then:

"I don't doubt your sincerity," he told Smithy. "Never saw you till yesterday, but your father's 'O.K.' goes a hundred per cent with me. Old 'J. G.' and I have been through a lot of scraps together." His frowning eyes relaxed for a moment to exchange twinkling glances with the older man.

"No, it isn't that," he added, "but. . . ." Again he stared at the flimsy piece of paper.

"What's on your mind, Bill?" asked Smith senior. "That stuff the boy told us was pretty wild"—he laid one hand affectionately upon Smithy's shoulder—"but he's a poor liar, Gordon is, and, knowing his weakness, he usually sticks to the truth. And there's no record of insanity in the family, you know. If there's something sticking in your crop, Bill, cough it up."

And the Honorable William B. Drake obeyed. "Listen to this," he commanded, and read from the paper in his hand:

> "'Replying to your inquiry about the doings at Seven Palms. Some Indians did that job. No help neded. I can handle this. Posse organized and we are leaving right now.—Signed, Jack Downer, Sheriff, Cocos County.'"

"That sounds authentic," said Smithy drily. "I've met the sheriff."

"Now, if it *was* Indians that got tanked up and came down off the reservation, burned Seven Palms and cleaned up your camp—" began Governor Drake.

"It wasn't!" Smithy interrupted hotly. "I told you—" He felt his father's hand gripping firmly at his shoulder.

"Steady," said Smith, senior. "Let him talk, son."

"There's an election three months from now, J. G.," said the Governor, "and you know they're riding me hard. Let me make one false move—just one—anything that the opposition can use for a campaign of ridicule, and my goose is cooked to a turn."

GORDON SMITH shook off his father's restraining hand and took one quick forward step. His face, even through the tan of the desert sun, was unnaturally pale.

"Election be damned!" he exploded. "Dean Rawson has been captured by those red devils—he's down there, the whitest white man I ever met! I've been to the sheriff; now I've come to you! Do you mean to tell me there isn't any power in this state to back me up when—"

He stopped. There was a tremble in his voice he could not control.

"Good boy," said Governor Drake softly. "Now I know it's the truth. Yes, you'll be backed up, plenty, but for the present it will be strictly unofficial. Now pull in your horns and listen.

"You know the lay of the land. I want your help. Go out to Field Three; there'll be a man there waiting for you. Don't call him 'Colonel'—he's also strictly unofficial today. The sheriff and his posse will be there at Seven Palms inside an hour; I want you to be there, too, about five thousand feet up.

"Tell Colonel Culver—I mean Mr. Culver—your story; tell him everything you know. He'll be in charge of operations if we have to send in troops; he'll give you that private and unofficial backing I spoke of if we don't.

"Now get down there; keep your eye on the sheriff's crowd and see everything that happens!"

But Smithy's parting remark was to his father; it was a continuation of the subject they had been discussing before.

"You can buy at your own price," he said. "They've got rights to the whole basin. But they've quit; I'm not treating them to a double-cross."

And he added as he went out of the room: "Buy it for me if you don't want it yourself."

IT was a two-place, open-cockpit plane that Smithy found had been set aside for him. Dual control—the stick in the forward cockpit carried the firing grip that controlled the slim blue machine guns firing through the propeller. Behind the rear cockpit a strange, unwieldy, double-ended weapon was recessed and streamlined into the fuselage. The scout seemed quite able to protect itself in an emergency.

Beside the plane a tall, slender man in civilian attire was waiting. He stuck out his hand, while the gray eyes in his lean, tanned face scanned Smithy swiftly.

"I'm Culver. Understand I'm to be your passenger to-day. How about it—can you fly the ship? Seven hundred and fifty DeGrosse motor—retractable landing gear, of course. She hits four-fifty at top speed—snappy—quick on the trigger."

Smithy shook his head dubiously. "Four-fifty—I'm not accustomed to that. But you can take the stick, Mr. Culver, if I get in a hurry and jump out and run on ahead. You see I'm used to my own ship, an *Assegai*—special job—does five hundred when I'm pressed for time."

The lean face of Mr. Culver creased into a smile. "You qualify," he said. "But keep your hands off the dead mule."

At an inquiring glance he pointed to the heavy, half-hidden weapon that Smithy had noticed. "Can't kick," he explained, "—hence 'dead mule.' It's the new Rickert recoilless; throws little shells the size of your thumb—but they raise hell when they hit."

"Sounds interesting." Smithy climbed into the rear cockpit and strapped himself in. "Show me how it works, then I won't do it."

A PISTOL grip moved under Culver's reaching hand and the strange weapon sprang from concealment like something alive. The pistol grip moved sideways, and the gun swung out and down, its muzzle almost touching the ground. Smithy was suddenly aware that a crystal above his instrument board was reflecting that same bit of sun-baked earth. A dot of black hung stationary at the crystal's center.

"That's your target." Culver's voice held all the pride of a child with a new toy, but he released the grip, and the ungainly gun swung smoothly back to its hiding place.

He settled himself in the forward cockpit. "You will find a helmet there," he said. "It's phone-equipped; you can tell me all about that wild nightmare of yours while we jog along."

The white beam from the despatcher's tower had been on them while they talked. Other planes were waiting on the field. Smithy smiled as he settled the helmet over his head. "For a strictly unofficial flight," he thought, "we're getting darned good service."

He taxied past a hangar where uniformed men pointedly paid them no attention. He swung the ship to the line as Airboard regulations required.

"N-73" was painted on the monoplane's low wings that seemed scraping the ground. "N-73 Clear!" the despatcher's voice radioed into Smithy's ears. Then the seven-hundred-and-fifty-horsepower DeGrosse let loose its voice as Smithy gunned her down the field.

WHATEVER doubts Colonel Culver may have had of Smithy's ability were dissipated as they made their way cautiously through the free-flying area under five thousand. Everywhere were mail planes, express and passenger ships taking off for the transcontinental day run, and private planes scattering to the smaller landing areas among the flashing lights of the flat-topped business blocks. Among them Smithy threaded his way toward the green-lighted transfer zone, where he spiraled upward.

At ten thousand he was on his course. He set the gyro-control which would fly the ship more surely than any human hands, and the air-speed indicator crept up to the four hundred and fifty miles an hour that Culver had promised. Not till then did he give the man in the forward cockpit the details of his "nightmare."

He had not finished answering the other's incredulous questions when he throttled down to slow cruising speed and nosed the ship toward a distant expanse of sage-blurred sand.

Outside the restricted metropolitan area he had already dropped out of the chill wind that struck them at ten thousand. Behind them and off to the right was the gray rampart of the Sierra. Ahead a rough circle of darker hills enclosed the great bowl he had learned to know as Tonah Basin.

SOME feeling of unreality in his own experiences must have crept into his mind; unconsciously he had been questioning his own sanity. Now, at sight of the sandy waste where he and Rawson had labored, with the dark slopes of desolate craters looming ahead and a blot of burned wreckage directly below to mark the site of their camp, the horrible reality of it gripped him again.

He could not speak at first. The air of the five-thousand level was not uncomfortably warm, but Smithy was feeling again the baking heat of that desert land; again he was with Rawson in the volcanic crater; Dean was calling to him, warning him. . . .

A sharp question from Culver was repeated twice before Smithy could reply.

He side-slipped in above the crater's ragged rim, heedless of downdrafts—the power of the DeGrosse motor would pull them out of anything in a ten-thousand-foot vertical climb if need arose. Smithy was pointing toward a confusion of shining black rock.

"Over there," he told Culver. Then he was shouting into the telephone transmitter. "It's open," he said. "That's where Dean went down—and there they are! Look, man, there—there!"

CHAPTER XIV

Emergency Order

THE throat of the old volcano was a pit of blackness in the midst of gray ash and the red-yellow of cinders. Beside it were other flecks of color: red, moving bodies; metal, that twinkled brightly under the desert sun—and in an instant they were gone. Nor did Smithy, throwing the thundering plane close over that place, know how near he had passed to sudden, invisible death. Rugged pinnacles of rock were ahead. The plane under Smithy's hands vaulted over them and roared on above the desert.

"Did you see them?" Smithy was shouting.

The man in the forward cockpit turned to face his pilot. "I am apologizing, Smith, for all the things I have been thinking and haven't said. We've got a job on our hands. Now let's find that fool

sheriff who thinks he's hunting for drunken Indians. We must warn him."

Smithy wondered at the wisps of blue smoke still rising from the ruins of Seven Palms as he drove in above it. It seemed years since he had left the Basin, yet the wreckage of this litle town, only five miles outside, still smoldered.

Colonel Culver was shouting to him. "East," he said. "Swing east. There's fighting over there." Then, in his usual cool tone: "I'll take the ship, Smith. Give them a burst or two from up here—perhaps the sheriff can use a little help."

Across the yellow sand ran a desert road. Ten miles away black smoke clouds were lifting. Smithy knew there had been a little settlement there. A dozen houses, perhaps, and a gasoline station. At half that distance the clear sunlight showed moving objects on the sand: automobiles, smaller dots that were running them. They came suddenly to sharp visibility as the plane drew near. Tiny bursts of white meant rifle fire.

They were a thousand feet up and close when Smithy saw the first car vanish in flame. Others followed swiftly. Men were falling. A dozen of them had made up the sheriff's posse, and now, like the cars, they, too, burst into flame and either vanished utterly or, like living torches, were cast down upon the sand.

Still no sign of the enemy, more than the ripping stab of green fire from a sand dune at one side. They were over and past before Smithy, looking back, saw the red ones leap out into view.

CULVER must have seen them in the same instant. He throttled down to a safe banking speed. Opened full, the DeGrosse would have whipped them around in a turn that would have meant instant death. From five miles distant they shot in on a long slant. Smithy's hands were off the stick. It was Culver's ship now.

He saw the man peering through his sights, then the roar of the motor held other, sharper sounds. Thin flames were stabbing through the propeller disk, and he knew that the bow guns were sending messengers on ahead where red figures waited on the sand.

Their trajectory flattened, Culver half rolled the ship as they sped overhead. "He wants a look at them," Smithy was thinking. Then a blast of heat struck him full in the face.

It was Smithy's hand on the stick that righted the ship; only the instant response of the big DeGrosse motor tore them up and away from the sands that were reaching for those wings.

His face was seared, but the pain of it was forgotten in the knowledge that their drunken, twisting flight had whipped out the fire licking back from the forward cockpit. He saw Culver's head, fallen awkwardly to one side. The helmet in one part was charred to a crisp.

He leveled off. He was thinking: "Another man gone! Can't I ever fight back? If I only had a gun!" Then he knew he was looking at the pistol grip, where Colonel Culver's brown hand had brought an awkward weapon to life. His lips twisted to a whimsical smile, though his eyes still held the same cold fury, as he whispered: "And I don't even know that the damn thing's loaded—but I'm going to find out!"

THEY were clustered on the sands below him as he roared overhead. He was flying at two thousand, the throttle open full. Beside the ship a gun swung its long barrel downward. It sputtered almost soundlessly—but where it

passed, the sand rose up in spouting fountains.

But his wild speed made the gunfire almost useless. The shell-bursts were spaced too far apart; they straddled the blot of figures.

He came back at five thousand feet, slowly—until the ship lurched, and he saw the right wing tip vanish in a shower of molten metal. He threw the ship over and away from the invisible beam; the plane writhed and twisted across the last half mile of sky. He was over them when he pulled into a tight spiral, then he swung the pistol grip that controlled the gun until the dot in the crystal was merged with the target of clustering red forms. The gun sputtered.

Below the plane, the quiet desert heaved its smooth surface convulsively into the air. Even above the roar of the motor Smithy heard the terrific thunder of that one long explosion.

Above the rim of the forward cockpit Culver's head rolled uneasily; his voice, thick and uncertain, came back through the phone; and later—only a matter of minutes later, though fifty miles away—Smithy set the plane down on a level expanse of sand and tore frantically at his belt. Colonel Culver was weakly raising his head.

"WHAT hit us?" he demanded when Smithy got to him. "Did I crash?" He looked about him with dazed eyes from which he never would have seen again, but for the protection of his goggles.

"Fire," said Smithy tersely. "They did it, the devils, and it wasn't a flame-thrower, either. There wasn't a flash of their cursed green light. It just flicked us for a second. You got the worst of it. Your half roll saved us. That thing, whatever it was, would have ripped our left wing off in a second."

He was looking at the forward cockpit where the metal fuselage was melted. The leather cushioning around the edge was black and charred. Culver's helmet had protected him, but half of his face was seared as if it had been struck by a white flame.

"But we got some of them: they know we can hit back. . . ." Smithy began, but knew he was speaking to deaf ears. Again his passenger had lapsed into unconsciousness.

Quickly he disconnected their own radio receiver and threw on the emergency radio siren. Ahead of them for a hundred miles an invisible beam was carrying the discordant blast. Then, with throttle open full, regardless of levels and of air traffic that tore frenziedly from his path, he drove straight for the home field.

IN the office of the Governor, the radio newscaster was announcing last-minute items of interest. The Governor switched off the instrument as Smithy entered, supporting the tall figure of Colonel Culver, whose face and head were swathed in bandages. Culver had insisted upon accompanying him for the rendering of their report, though Smithy had to do the talking for both of them.

He outlined their experience in brief sentences. "And now," he was saying grimly, "you can go as far as you please, Governor. You've got a man's sized fight on your hands. We don't know how many there are of them. We don't know how fast they'll spread out, but—"

A shrill wail interrupted him. From the newscasting instrument came a flash of red that filled the room. The crystal, the emergency call, installed on all radios within the past year and never yet used, was clamoring for the country's attention.

Governor Drake sprang to switch it on, and tried to explain to Smithy

as he did so. "It's out of my hands now," he said. "Washington has—" Then the radio came on with a voice which shouted:

"Emergency order. All aircraft take notice. Mole-men"—Smithy started at the sound of the word; it was the name he had given them himself—"Mole-men are invading Western states. A new race. They have come from within the earth. In Arizona, three ships of the Transcontinental Day Line, Southern Division, have been destroyed with the loss of all passengers and crew. Shattered in air.

"It is war, war with an unknown race. Goldfield, Nevada, is in ruins. Heavy loss of life. Federal Government taking control. Air-Control Board orders traffic to avoid following areas. . . ."

There followed a list of locations, while still the red crystal blazed its warning across the land and to all aircraft in the skies. Southern California, Arizona, Nevada—Southern Transcontinental Routes closed; all except military aircraft grounded in restricted areas.

SMITHY'S excitement had left him. In his mind he was looking far off, deep under the surface of the world. "They've been there," he said quietly, "thousands of years. A new race—and they've just now learned of this other world outside. Three ships downed! They picked them off in the air just as they tried to do with us. I knew we had a fight on our hands."

His voice died to silence in the room where now the new announcer was giving a list of the dead—a room where men were speechless before an emergency no man could have foreseen. But Smithy's eyes, gazing far off, saw nothing of that room. Again he was seated on an outthrust point of rock, Dean Rawson beside him, and from the black depths beneath a man's voice was rising clearly, mockingly it seemed, in song:

"You're pokin' through the crust
of hell
And braggin' too damn loud of it,
For, when you get to hell, you'll
find
The devil there to pay!"

"The devil is there to pay," Smithy repeated softly. He leaned across and placed one hand on Colonel Culver's knee. "With your assistance, Colonel, I'd like to go down there and find him. You and I, we know the way—we'll organize an expedition. Maybe we can settle that debt."

CHAPTER XV

The Lake of Fire

BEFORE a barrier of gold, waist-high, Dean Rawson stood tense and rigid. Behind him the great cave-room swarmed with warriors, leaders, doubtless, of the unholy hordes. But beyond the barrier were the real leaders of the Mole-men tribes—Phee-e-al, ruler in chief, and his clustering guard of high priests. In the flooding light from the wall, their eyes were circles of dead-white skin. A black speck glinted wickedly in the center of each.

Phee-e-al was speaking. His artificially whitened face grimaced hideously; the shrill whistling voice made no comprehensible sound. But in some manner Rawson gathered a dim realization of what his gestures meant.

Phee-e-al pointed at the captive; and one lean hand, with talons more suggestive of a bird of prey than of a human hand, pointed downward. "Gevarro," he said. The word was repeated many times in the course of his whistling talk.

"Gevarro"—what did it mean? Then Rawson remembered. It was

the word he had heard in his dreams, the name of the lake of fire.

The voices of the priests rose in a shrill chorus of protests, and even Phee-e-al stood silent. They crowded about their ruler, and Rawson knew they were demanding him for themselves. Then the one who still held a human body in his arms sprang forward and his long talons worked unspeakable mutilation upon the body and face.

Rawson averted his eyes from the ghastly spectacle. For, swiftly, he was seeing something more horrifying than this desecration of a dead body; he was seeing himself, still living, tortured and torn by those same beastly hands. The dead face of Sheriff Downer was staring at him from red, eyeless sockets as with one leap Rawson threw himself over the golden wall. Ten leaping strides away was his gun. In that instant of realization, he knew why his life had been spared.

In the room of fire he had destroyed their priest. They had saved him for further torture.

TO get his hands on the gun, to die fighting—the thought was an unspoken prayer in his mind. Behind him the room echoed with demoniac shrieks. Before him was the metal stand. His outstretched hands fell just short of the blue .45 as he crashed to the floor. The copper ones were upon him.

Half stunned by the fall, he hardly knew when they dragged him to his feet. He was facing the golden figure of Phee-e-al, but now the ruler's indecision had vanished. He was exercising his full authority and even Rawson's throbbing brain comprehended the doom that was being pronounced.

"Gevarro!" he was shrieking. "Gevarro!"

Beside him a priest swept the metal table clear. Rawson's clothing, the gun, the radio receiver, all were snatched up and hurled into one of the massive chests. Phee-e-al was still shouting shrill commands. An instant later Rawson was lifted in air, rushed to the barrier and thrown bodily from the sacred premises he had invaded. Then the hands of the red guard closed about him before he could struggle to his feet. A shining object swung down above his head. It was the last he knew.

HIS dreams were of falling. Always when he half roused to consciousness he was aware of that smooth, even descent, and he knew it had continued for hours.

Once he saw black walls slipping smoothly past, upward, always upward. Gropingly he tried to marshal his facts into some understandable sequence. He was falling, falling toward the center of the earth, and this that he saw was not rock, or any metal such as he knew.

"It's all different," he told himself dully, "new kind of matter. Rock would flow; this stands the pressure." But he knew the air pressure had built up tremendously. The blood was pounding in his ears. He wanted to sleep.

It was the heat that awakened him. The air was stifling him, suffocating. He was struggling to move his heavy body, fighting against this nightmare of heat when he opened his eyes and knew that he was in a place of light. First to be seen were walls, no longer black, no longer even with the characteristics of rock, or even metal. Here, as Rawson had sensed, was new material to form the core of a world. It would have been red in an ordinary light. It was transformed to orange, strangely terrifying in the blazing flood of yellow brilliance that came from the tunnel's end.

Rawson's brain was not working clearly. An unendurable weight

seemed pressing upon him—the air pressure, he thought, to which he had not yet become accustomed. And the air, itself, hot—hot!

A breeze blew steadily past toward that place of yellow horror at the tunnel's end. Yellow, that reflected light; but its source was a searing, dazzling white in the one brief instant when Rawson dared turn his eyes.

Hands held him erect, red, gripping hands. One, whose body seemed molten copper in that fierce glare, approached. His hand described a circle over Rawson's bare chest. Straight lines radiated out from the circle, lines of stabbing pain for the helpless man. He had seen the same emblem in the temple of fire, again in the big room where Phee-e-al had stood.

THE living sacrifice was prepared. Burned into his bare flesh was the emblem of their legendary sun-god. The priests, their bodies coated with a flashing coppery film that must somehow be heat-resistant, had him in their grasp.

The red warriors had fallen back. Then Phee-e-al appeared; he joined the march of death of which Dean Rawson formed the head. Voices were chanting—somewhere a trumpet blared. Then Rawson, moving like one in a dream, knew the priests were guiding him toward that waiting, incredible heat.

The tunnel's end was near. About him was an inferno where heat and hot colors blended. The whole world seemed aflame, but beyond the tunnel's end was a seething pit upon which no human eyes could look and live.

One glimpse only of the unbearable whiteness beneath which was the lake of fire, then the chains of his stupor broke and Dean Rawson struggled frenziedly in the grip of two copper giants.

They had been chanting a shrill monotonous refrain. They ceased now as they fought to throw the man out past that last ten paces where even they dared not go.

Rawson was beyond conscious thought. Eyes closed against the unendurable heat, he fought blindly, desperately, then knew his last strength was going from him. Still struggling he opened his eyes; some thought of meeting death face to face compelled him.

A HIDEOUS coppery face glared close into his own. Miraculously it vanished, disappeared in a cloud of white. Then the blazing walls were gone—there was nothing in all the world but rushing clouds of whiteness, shrieking winds, the roar of an explosion—and cold, so biting that it burned like heat.

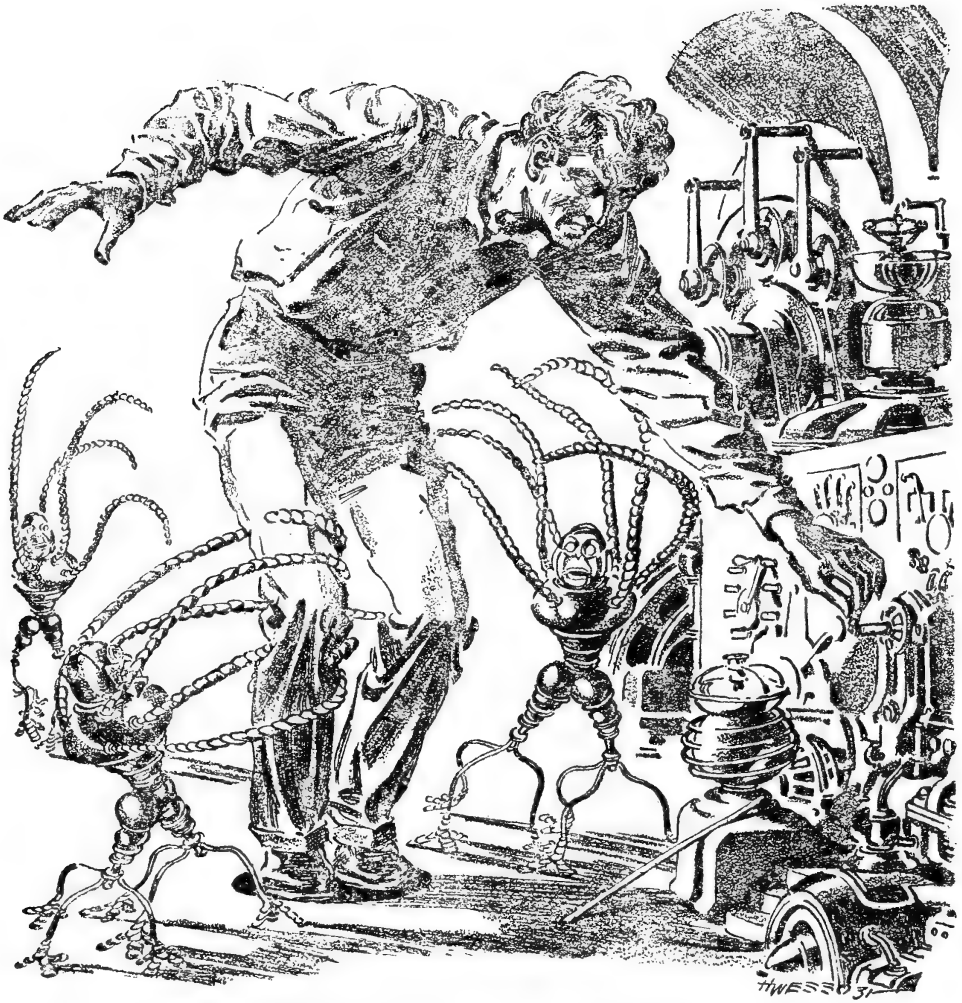
Vaguely he wondered at the hands that still clutched at him. Dimly he sensed other bodies close to his, other hands that tore him free where he lay, still struggling with the priests, upon the floor. A narrow opening was in the wall, a blur of darkness in the billowing white clouds. They were dragging him into it, those others who held him, and they were white—white as the vapor that whirled about him.

Ahead, the girl of his former dreams was guiding him, her hand cool and soft in his. Others helped him; he ran stumblingly where they led down a steep and narrow way.

The Whites Ones! In a vision they had reached out to him before. Was this, too, a dream? Was it only the delirium of death? That burst of cold—had it truly been liquid fires wrapping him around?

Dean Rawson could not be sure. He knew only that his fate lay wholly in the hands of these White Ones—and that hideous eyes in the coppery face of a priest had glared at them as they fled.

(To be continued.)



He somehow managed to close the tiny switch.

Raiders of the Universes

By Donald Wandrei

IT was in the thirty-fourth century that the dark star began its famous conquest, unparalleled in stellar annals. Phobar the astronomer discovered it. He was sweeping the heavens with one of the newly - invented multipowered Sussendorf comet-hunters when something caught his eye—a new star of great brilliance in the foreground of the constellation Hercules.

For the rest of the night, he cast aside all his plans and concentrated on the one star. He witnessed an unprecedented event. Mercia's

Childlike, the great astronomer Phobar stands before the metallic invaders of the ravished solar system.

nullifier had just been invented, a curious and intricate device, based on four-dimensional geometry, that made it possible to see occurrences in the universe which had hitherto required the hundreds of years needed for light to cross the intervening space before they were visible on Earth. By a hasty calculation with the aid of this invention, Phobar found that the new star was about three thousand light years distant, and that it was hurtling backward into space at the rate of twelve hundred miles per second. The remarkable feature of his discovery was this appearance of a fourth-magnitude star where none had been known to exist. Perhaps it had come into existence this very night.

On the succeeding night, he was given a greater surprise. In line with the first star, but several hundred light-years nearer, was a second new star of even more brightness. And it, too, was hurtling backward into space at approximately twelve hundred miles per second. Phobar was astonished. Two new stars discovered within twenty-four hours in the same part of the heavens, both of the fourth magnitude! But his surprise was as nothing when on the succeeding night, even while he watched, a third new star appeared in line with these, but much closer.

At midnight he first noticed a pin-point of faint light; by one o'clock the star was of eighth magnitude. At two it was a brilliant sun of the second magnitude blazing away from Earth like the others at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second. And on the next evening, and the next, and the next, other new stars appeared until there were seven in all, every one on a line in the same constellation Hercules, every one with the same radiance and the same proper motion, though of varying size!

PHOBAR had broadcast his discovery to incredulous astronomers; but as star after star appeared nightly, all the telescopes on Earth were turned toward one of the most spectacular cataclysms that history recorded. Far out in the depths of space, with unheard-of regularity and unheard-of precision, new worlds were flaming up overnight in a line that began at Hercules and extended toward the solar system.

Phobar's announcement was immediately flashed to Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, the other members of the Five World Federation. Saturn reported no evidence of the phenomena, because of the interfering rings and the lack of Mercia's nullifier. But Jupiter, with a similar device, witnessed the phenomena and announced furthermore that many stars in the neighborhood of the novæ had begun to deviate in singular and abrupt fashion from their normal positions.

There was not as yet much popular interest in the phenomena. Without Mercia's nullifier, the stars were not visible to ordinary eyes, since the light-rays would take years to reach the Earth. But every astronomer who had access to Mercia's nullifier hastened to focus his telescope on the region where extraordinary events were taking place out in the unfathomable gulf of night. Some terrific force was at work, creating worlds and disturbing the positions of stars within a radius already known to extend billions and trillions of miles from the path of the seven new stars. But of the nature of that force, astronomers could only guess.

PHOBAR took up his duties early on the eighth night. The last star had appeared about five hundred light-years distant. If an eighth new star was found, it should be not more than a few

light-years away. But nothing happened. All night Phobar kept his telescope pointed at the probable spot, but search as he might, the heavens showed nothing new. In the morning he sought eagerly for news of any discovery made by fellow-watchers, but they, too, had found nothing unusual. Could it be that the mystery would now fade away, a new riddle of the skies?

The next evening, he took up his position once more, training his telescope on the seven bright stars, and then on the region where an eighth, if there were one, should appear. For hours he searched the abyss in vain. He could find none. Apparently the phenomena were ended. At midnight he took a last glance before entering on some tedious calculations. It was there! In the center of the telescope a faint, hazy object steadily grew in brightness. All his problems were forgotten as Phobar watched the eighth star increase hourly. Closer than any other, closer even than Alpha Centauri, the new sun appeared, scarcely three light-years away across the void surrounding the solar system. And all the while he watched, he witnessed a thing no man had ever before seen—the birth of a world!

BY one o'clock, the new star was of fifth magnitude; by two it was of the first. As the faint flush of dawn began to come toward the close of that frosty, moonless November night, the new star was a great white-hot object more brilliant than any other star in the heavens. Phobar knew that when its light finally reached Earth so that ordinary eyes could see, it would be the most beautiful object in the night sky. What was the reason for these unparalleled births of worlds and the terrifying mathematical precision that characterized them?

Whatever the cosmic force behind, it was progressing toward the solar system. Perhaps it would even disturb the balance of the planets. The possible chance of such an event had already called the attention of some astronomers, but the whole phenomenon was too inexplicable to permit more than speculation.

The next evening was cloudy. Jupiter reported nothing new except that Neptune had deviated from its course and tended to pursue an erratic and puzzling new orbit.

Phobar pondered long over this last news item and turned his attention to the outermost planet on the succeeding night. To his surprise, he had great difficulty in locating it. The ephemeris was of absolutely no use. When he did locate Neptune after a brief search, he discovered it more than eighty million miles from its scheduled place! This was at one-forty. At two-ten he was thunderstruck by a special announcement sent from the Central Bureau to every observatory and astronomer of note throughout the world, proclaiming the discovery of an ultra-Plutonian planet. Phobar was incredulous. For centuries it had been proved that no planet beyond Pluto could possibly exist.

WITH feverish haste, Phobar ran to the huge telescope and rapidly focused it where the new planet should be. Five hundred million miles beyond Neptune was a flaming path like the beam of a giant searchlight that extended exactly to the eighth solar planet. Phobar gasped. He could hardly credit the testimony of his eyes. He looked more closely. The great stream of flame still crossed his line of vision. But this time he saw something else: at the precise farther end of the flame path was a round disk—dark!

Beyond a doubt, a new planet of vast size now formed an addition to the solar group. But that planet was almost impervious to the illuminating rays of the sun and was barely discernible. Neptune itself shone brighter than it ever had, and was falling away from the sun at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second.

All night Phobar watched the double mystery. By three o'clock, he was convinced, as far as lightning calculations showed, that the invader was hurtling toward the sun at a speed of more than ten million miles an hour. At three-fifteen, he thought that vanishing Neptune seemed brighter even than the band of fire running to the invader. At four, his belief was certainty. With amazement and awe, Phobar sat through the long, cold night, watching a spectacular and terrible catastrophe in the sky.

As dawn began to break and the stars grew paler, Phobar turned away from his telescope, his brain awhirl, his heart filled with a great fear. He had witnessed the devastation of a world, the ruin of a member of his own planetary system by in invader from outer space. As dawn cut short his observations, he knew at last the cause of Neptune's brightness, knew that it was now a white-hot flaming sun that sped with increased rapidity away from the solar system. Somehow, the terrible swathe of fire that flowed from the dark star to Neptune had wrenched it out of its orbit and made of it a molten inferno.

AT dawn came another bulletin from the Central Bureau. Neptune had a surface temperature of 3,000° C, was defying all laws of celestial mechanics, and within three days would have left the solar system for ever. The results of such a disaster were unpredictable. The entire solar system was likely to break up. Already Uranus and Jupiter had deviated from their orbits. Unless something speedily occurred to check the onrush of the dark star, it was prophesied that the laws governing the planetary system would run to a new balance and that in the ensuing chaos the whole group would spread apart and fall toward the gulfs beyond the great surrounding void.

What was the nature of the great path of fire? What force did it represent? And was the dark star controlled by intelligence, or was it a blind wanderer from space that had come by accident? The flame-path alone implied that the dark star was guided by an intelligence that possessed the secret of inconceivable power. Menace hung in the sky now where all eyes could see in a great arc of fire!

The world was on the brink of eternity, and vast forces at whose nature men could only guess were sweeping planets and suns out of its path.

The following night was again cold and clear. High in the heavens, where Neptune should have been, hung a disk of enormously greater size. Neptune itself was almost invisible, hundreds of millions of miles beyond its scheduled position. As nearly as Phobar could estimate, not one hundredth of the sun's rays were reflected from the surface of the dark star, a proportion far below those for the other planets. Phobar had a better view of the flame-path, and it was with growing awe that he watched that strange swathe in the sky during the dead of night. It shot out from the dark star like a colossal beam or huge pillar of fire seeking a food of worlds.

With a shiver of cold fear he saw that there were now three of the bands: one toward Neptune, one toward Saturn, and one toward the

sun. The first was fading, a milky, misty white; the second shone almost as bright as the first one previously had; and the third, toward the sun, was a dazzling stream of orange radiance, burning with a steady, terrible, unbelievable intensity across two and a half billions of miles of space! That gigantic flare was the most brilliant sight in the whole night sky, an awful and abysmally prophetic flame that made city streets black with staring people, a radiance whose grandeur and terrific implication of cosmic power brought beauty and the fear of doom into the heavens!

THOSE paths could not be explained by all the physicists and all the astronomers in the Five World Federation. They possessed the properties of light, but they were rigid bands like a tube or a solid pillar from which only the faintest of rays escaped; and they completely shut off the heavens behind them. They had, moreover, singular properties which could not be described, as if a new force were embodied in them.

Hour after hour humanity watched the spectacular progress of the dark star, watched those mysterious and threatening paths of light that flowed from the invader. When dawn came, it brought only a great fear and the oppression of impending disaster.

In the early morning, Phobar slept. When he awoke, he felt refreshed and decided to take a short walk in the familiar and peaceful light of day. He never took that walk. He opened the door on a kind of dim and reddish twilight. Not a cloud hung in the sky, but the sun shone feebly with a dull red glow, and the skies were dull and somber, as if the sun were dying as scientists had predicted it eventually would.

Phobar stared at the dull heavens in a daze, at the foreboding atmosphere and the livid sun that burned faintly as through a smoke curtain. Then the truth flashed on him—it was the terrible path of fire from the dark star! By what means he could not guess, by what appalling control of immense and inconceivable forces he could not even imagine, the dark star was sucking light and perhaps more than light from the sun!

PHOBAR turned and shut the door. The world had seen its last dawn. If the purpose of the dark star was destruction, none of the planets could offer much opposition, for no weapon of theirs was effective beyond a few thousand miles range at most—and the dark star could span millions. If the invader passed on, its havoc would be only a trifle smaller, for it had already destroyed two members of the solar system and was now striking at its most vital part. Without the sun, life would die, but even with the sun the planets must rearrange themselves because of the destruction of balance.

Even he could hardly grasp the vast and abysmal catastrophe that without warning had swept from space. How could the dark star have traversed three thousand light-years of space in a week's time? It was unthinkable! So stupendous a control of power, so gigantic a manipulation of cosmic forces, so annihilating a possession of the greatest secrets of the universe, was an unheard-of concentration of energy and knowledge of stellar mechanics. But the evidence of his own eyes and the path of the dark star with flaming suns to mark its progress, told him in language which could not be refuted that the dark star possessed all that immeasurable, titanic knowledge. It was the lord of the universe. There was nothing which the dark star

could not crush or conquer or change. The thought of that immense, supreme power numbed his mind. It opened vistas of a civilization, and a progress, and an unparalleled mastery of all knowledge which was almost beyond conception.

ALREADY the news had raced across the world. On Phobar's television screen flashed scenes of nightmare; the radio spewed a gibberish of terror. In one day panic had swept the Earth; on the remaining members of the Five World Federation the same story was repeated. Rioting mobs drowned out the chant of religious fanatics who hailed Judgment Day. Great fires turned the air murky and flame-shot. Machine guns spat regularly in city streets; looting, murder, and fear-crazed crimes were universal. Civilization had completely vanished overnight.

The tides roared higher than they ever had before; for every thousand people drowned on the American seaboards, a hundred thousand perished in China and India. Dead volcanoes boomed into the worst eruptions known. Half of Japan sank during the most violent earthquake in history. Land rocked, the seas boiled, cyclones howled out of the skies. A billion eyes focused on Mecca, the mad beating of tom-toms rolled across all Africa, women and children were trampled to death by the crowds that jammed into churches.

"Has man lived in vain?" asked the philosopher.

"The world is doomed. There is no escape," said the scientist.

"The day of reckoning has come! The wrath of God is upon us!" shouted the street preachers.

In a daze, Phobar switched off the bedlam and, walking like a man asleep, strode out, he did not care where, if only to get away.

The ground and the sky were like a dying fire. The sun seemed a half-dead cinder. Only the great swathe of radiance between the sun and the dark star had any brilliance. Sinister, menacing, now larger even than the sun, the invader from beyond hung in the heavens.

As Phobar watched it, the air around him prickled strangely. A sixth sense gave warning. He turned to race back into his house. His legs failed. A fantastic orange light bathed him, countless needles of pain shot through his whole body, the world darkened.

EARTH had somehow been blotted out. There was a brief blackness, the nausea of space and of a great fall that compressed eternity into a moment. Then a swimming confusion, and outlines which gradually came to rest.

Phobar was too utterly amazed to cry out or run. He stood inside the most titanic edifice he could have imagined, a single gigantic structure vaster than all New York City. Far overhead swept a black roof fading into the horizon, beneath his feet was the same metal substance. In the midst of this giant work soared the base of a tower that pierced the roof thousands of feet above.

Everywhere loomed machines, enormous dynamos, cathode tubes a hundred feet long, masses and mountains of such fantastic apparatus as he had never encountered. The air was bluish, electric. From the black substance came a phosphorescent radiance. The triumphant drone of motors and a terrific crackle of electricity were everywhere. Off to his right purple-blue flames the size of Sequoia trees flickered around a group of what looked like condensers as huge as Gibraltar. At the base of the central tower half a mile distant Phobar

could see something that resembled a great switchboard studded with silver controls. Near it was a series of mechanisms at whose purpose he could not even guess.

ALL this his astounded eyes took in at one confused glance. The thing that gave him unreasoning terror was the hundred-foot-high metal monster before him. It defied description. It was unlike any color known on earth, a blinding color sinister with power and evil. Its shape was equally ambiguous — it rippled like quicksilver, now compact, now spread out in a thousand limbs. But what appalled Phobar was its definite possession of rational life. More, its very thoughts were transmitted to him as clearly as though written in his own English:

"Follow me!"

Phobar's mind did not function—but his legs moved regularly. In the grasp of this mental, metal monster he was a mere automaton. Phobar noticed idly that he had to step down from a flat disk a dozen yards across. By some power, some tremendous discovery that he could not understand, he had been transported across millions of miles of space—undoubtedly to the dark star itself!

The colossal thing, indescribable, a blinding, nameless color, rippled down the hall and stooped before a disk of silvery black. In the center of the disk was a metal seat with a control board near-by.

"Be seated!"

Phobar sat down, the titan flicked the controls—and nothing happened.

Phobar sensed that something was radically wrong. He felt the surprise of his gigantic companion. He did not know it then, but the fate of the solar system hung on that incident.

"Come!"

ABRUPTLY the giant stooped, and Phobar shrank back, but a flowing mass of cold, insensate metal swept around him, lifted him fifty feet in the air. Dizzy, sick, horrified, he was hardly conscious of the whirlwind motion into which the giant suddenly shot. He had a dim impression of machines racing by, of countless other giants, of a sudden opening in the walls of the immense building, and then a rush across the surface of metal land. Even in his vertigo he had enough curiosity to marvel that there was no vegetation, no water, only the dull black metal everywhere. Yet there was air.

And then a city loomed before them. To Phobar it seemed a city of gods or giants. Fully five miles it soared toward space, its fantastic angles and arcs and cubes and pyramids mazing in the dimensions of a totally alien geometry. Tier by tier the stupendous city, hundreds of miles wide, mounted toward a central tower like the one in the building he had left.

Phobar never knew how they got there, but his numbed mind was at last forced into clarity by a greater will. He stared about him. His captor had gone. He stood in a huge chamber circling to a dome far overhead. Before him, on a dais a full thousand feet in diameter, stood—sat—rested, whatever it might be called—another monster, far larger than any he had yet seen, like a mountain of pliant thinking, living metal. And Phobar knew he stood in the presence of the ruler.

THE metal Cyclops surveyed him as Phobar might have surveyed an ant. Cold, deadly, dispassionate scrutiny came from something that might have been eyes, or a seeing intelligence locked in a metal body.

There was no sound, but inwardly to Phobar's consciousness

from the peak of the titan far above him came a command:

"What are you called?"

Phobar opened his lips—but even before he spoke, he knew that the thing had understood his thought: "Phobar."

"I am Garboreggg, ruler of Xlarbti, the Lord of the Universes."

"Lord of the *Universes?*"

"I and my world come from one of the universes beyond the reach of your telescopes." Phobar somehow felt that the thing was talking to him as he would to a new-born babe.

"What do you want of me?"

"Tell your Earth that I want the entire supply of your radium ores mined and placed above ground according to the instructions I give, by seven of your days hence."

A dozen questions sprang to Phobar's lips. He felt again that he was being treated like a child.

"Why do you want our radium ores?"

"Because they are the rarest of the elements on your scale, are absent on ours, and supply us with some of the tremendous energy we need."

"Why don't you obtain the ores from other worlds?"

"We do. We are taking them from all worlds where they exist. But we need yours also."

Raiders of the universe! Looting young worlds of the precious radium ores! Piracy on a cosmic scale!

"And if Earth refuses your demand?"

FOR answer, Garboreggg rippled to a wall of the room and pressed a button. The wall dissolved, weirdly, mysteriously. A series of vast silver plates was revealed, and a battery of control levers.

"This will happen to all of your Earth unless the ores are given us."

The titan closed a switch. On the first screen flashed the picture of a huge tower such as Phobar had seen in the metal city.

Garboreggg adjusted a second control that was something like a range-finder. He pressed a third lever—and from the tower leaped a surge of terrific energy, like a bolt of lightning a quarter of a mile broad. The giant closed another switch—and on the second plate flashed a picture of New York City.

Then—waiting. Seconds, minutes drifted by. The atmosphere became tense, nerve-cracking. Phobar's eyes ached with the intensity of his stare. What would happen?

Abruptly it came.

A monstrous bolt of energy streaked from the skies, purple-blue death in a pillar a fourth of a mile broad crashed into the heart of New York City, swept up and down Manhattan, across and back, and suddenly vanished.

In fifteen seconds, only a molten hell of fused structures and incinerated millions of human beings remained of the world's first city.

Phobar was crushed, appalled, then utter loathing for this soulless thing poured through him. If only—

"It is useless. You can do nothing," answered the ruler as though it had grasped his thought.

"But why, if you could pick me off the Earth, do you not draw the radium ores in the same way?" Phobar demanded.

"The orange-gray picks up only loose, portable objects. We can and will transport the radium ores here by means of the ray after they have been mined and placed on platforms or disks."

"Why did you select me from all the millions of people on Earth?"

"Solely because you were the first apparent scientist whom our cosmotel chanced upon. It will be up to you to notify your Earth governments of our demand."

"But afterwards!" Phobar burst out aloud. "What then?"

"We will depart."

"It will mean death to us! The solar system will be wrecked with Neptune gone and Saturn following it!"

GARBOREGGG made no answer. To that impassive, cold, inhuman thing, it did not matter if a nation or a whole world perished. Phobar had already seen with what deliberate calm it destroyed a city, merely to show him what power the lords of Xlarbti controlled. Besides, what guarantee was there that the invaders would not loot the Earth of everything they wanted and then annihilate all life upon it before they departed? Yet Phobar knew he was helpless, knew that the men of Earth would be forced to do whatever was asked of them, and trust that the raiders would fulfill their promise.

"Two hours remain for your stay here," came the ruler's dictum to interrupt his line of thought. "For the first half of that period you will tell me of your world and answer whatever questions I may ask. During the rest of the interval, I will explain some of the things you wish to learn about us."

Again Phobar felt Garboreggg's disdain, knew that the metal giant regarded him as a kind of childish plaything for an hour or two's amusement. But he had no choice, and so he told Garboreggg of the life on Earth, how it arose and along what lines it had developed; he narrated in brief the extent of man's knowledge, his scientific achievements, his mastery of weapons and forces and machines, his social organization.

When he had finished, he felt as a Stone Age man might feel in the presence of a brilliant scientist of the thirty-fourth century. If any sign of interest had shown on the peak of the metallic lord, Phobar failed to see it. But he sensed an intolerant sneer of ridicule in Garboreggg, as though the ruler considered these statements to be only the most elementary of facts.

Then, for three quarters of an hour, in the manner of one lecturing an ignorant pupil, the giant crowded its thought-pictures into Phobar's mind so that finally he understood a little of the raiders and of the sudden terror that had flamed from the abysses into the solar system.

"THE universe of matter that you know is only one of the countless universes which comprise the cosmos," began Garboreggg. "In your universe, you have a scale of ninety-two elements, you have your color-spectrum, your rays and waves of many kinds. You are subject to definite laws controlling matter and energy as you know them.

"But we are of a different universe, on a different scale from yours, a trillion light-years away in space, eons distant in time. The natural laws which govern us differ from those controlling you. In our universe, you would be hopelessly lost, completely helpless, unless you possessed the knowledge that your people will not attain even in millions of years. But we, who are so much older and greater than you, have for so long studied the nature of the other universes that we can enter and leave them at will, taking what we wish, doing as we wish, creating or destroying worlds whenever the need arises, coming and hurtling away when we choose.

"There is no vegetable life in our universe. There is only the scale of elements ranging from 842 to 966 on the extension of your own scale. At this high range, metals of complex kinds exist. There is none of what you call water, no vegetable world, no ani-

mal kingdom. Instead, there are energies, forces, rays, and waves, which are food to us and which nourish our life-stream just as pigs, potatoes, and bread are food to you.

"TRILLIONS of years ago in your time-calculation, but only a few dozen centuries ago in ours, life arose on the giant world Kygpton in our universe. It was life, our life, the life of my people and myself, intelligence animating bodies of pliant metal, existing almost endlessly on an almost inexhaustible source of energy.

"But all matter wears down. On Kygpton there was a variety of useful metals, others that were valueless. There was comparatively little of the first, much of the second. Kygpton itself was a world as large as your entire solar system, with a diameter roughly of four billion miles. Our ancestors knew that Kygpton was dying, that the store of our most precious element Sthalreh was dwindling. But already our ancestors had mastered the forces of our universe, had made inventions that are beyond your understanding, had explored the limits of our universe in space-cars that were propelled by the free energies in space and by the attracting-repelling influences of stars.

"The metal inhabitants of Kygpton employed every invention they knew to accomplish an engineering miracle that makes your bridges and mines seem but the puny efforts of a gnat. They blasted all the remaining ores of Sthalreh from the surface and interior of Kygpton and refined them. Then they created a gigantic vacuum, a dead-field in space a hundred million miles away from their world. The dead-field was controlled from Kygpton by atomic-projectors, energy-absorbers, gravitation-nullifiers and cosmotels, range-regulators, and a host of other inventions.

"As fast as it was mined and extracted, the Sthalreh metal was vaporized, shot into the dead-field by interstellar rays, and solidified there along an invisible framework which we projected. In a decade of our time, we had pillaged Kygpton of every particle of Sthalreh. And then in our skies hung an artificial world, a manufactured sphere, a giant new planet, the world you yourself are now on—Xlarbti!

"WE did not create a solid globe. We left chambers, tunnels, passageways, storerooms throughout it or piercing it from surface to surface. Thus, even as Xlarbti was being created, we provided for everything that we needed or could need—experimental laboratories, sub-surface vaults, chambers for the innumerable huge ray dynamos, energy storage batteries, and other apparatus which we required.

"And when all was ready, we transferred by space-cars and by atomic individuation all our necessities from Kygpton to the artificial world Xlarbti. And when everything was prepared, we destroyed the dead-field by duplicate control from Xlarbti, turned our repulsion-power on full against the now useless and dying giant world Kygpton, and swung upon our path.

"But our whole universe is incredibly old. It was mature before ever your young suns flamed out of the gaseous nebulæ, it was decaying when your molten planets were flung from the central sun, it was dying before the boiling seas had given birth to land upon your sphere. And while we had enough of our own particular electrical food to last us for a million of your years, and enough power to guide Xlarbti to other universes, we had exhausted all the remaining energy of our entire universe. And

when we finally left it to dwindle behind us in the black abysses of space, we left it, a dead cinder, devoid of life, vitiated of activity, and utterly lacking in cosmic forces, a universe finally run down.

"The universes, as you may know, are set off from each other by totally black and empty abysms, expanses so vast that light-rays have not yet crossed many of them. How did we accomplish the feat of traversing such a gulf? By the simplest of means: acceleration. Why? Because to remain in our universe meant inevitable death. We gambled on the greatest adventure in all the cosmos.

"TO begin with, we circled our universe to the remotest point opposite where we wanted to leave it. We then turned our attraction powers on part way so that the millions of stars before us drew us ahead, then we gradually stepped up the power to its full strength, thus ever increasing our speed. At the same time, as stars passed to our rear in our flight, we turned our repulsion-rays against them, stepping that power up also.

"Our initial speed was twenty-four miles per second. Midway in our universe we had reached the speed of your light—186,000 miles per second. By the time we left our universe, we were hurtling at a speed which we estimated to be 1,600,000,000 miles per second. Yet even at that tremendous speed, it took us years to cross from our universe to yours. If we had encountered even a planetoid at that enormous rate, we would probably have been annihilated in white-hot death. But we had planned well, and there are no superiors to our stellar mechanics, our astronomers, our scientists.

"When we finally hurtled from the black void into your universe, we found what we had only dared hope for: a young universe, with many planets and cooling worlds rich in radium ores, the only element in your scale that can help to replenish our vanishing energy. Half your universe we have already deprived of its ores. Your Earth has more that we want. Then we shall continue on our way, to loot the rest of the worlds, before passing on to another universe. We are a planet without a universe. We will wander and pillage until we find a universe like the one we come from, or until Xlarbti itself disintegrates and we perish.

"WE could easily wipe out all the dwellers on Earth and mine the ores ourselves. But that would be a needless waste of our powers, for since you can not defy us, and since the desire for life burns as high in you as in us and as it does in all sensate things in all universes, your people will save themselves from death and save us from wasting energy by mining the ores for us. What happens afterwards, we do not care.

"The seven new suns that you saw were dead worlds that we used as buffers to slow down Xlarbti. The full strength of our repulsion-force directed against any single world necessarily turns it into a liquid or gaseous state depending on various factors. Your planet Neptune was pulled out of the solar system by the attraction of Xlarbti's mass. The flame-paths, as you call them, are directed streams of energy for different purposes: the one to the sun supplies us, for instance, with heat, light, and electricity, which in turn are stored up for eventual use.

"The orange-ray that you felt is one of our achievements. It is similar to the double-action pumps used in some of your sulphur mines, whereby a pipe is inclosed in a larger pipe, and hot water forced

down through the larger tubing returns sulphur-laden through the central pipe. The orange-ray instantaneously dissolves any portable object up to a certain size, propels it back to Xlarbti through its center which is the reverse ray, and here reforms the object, just as you were recreated on the disk that you stood on when you regained consciousness.

"But I have not enough time to explain everything on Xlarbti to you; nor would you comprehend it all if I did. Your stay is almost up.

"In that one control-panel lies all the power that we have mastered," boasted Garboreggg with supreme egotism. "It connects with the individual controls throughout Xlarbti."

"What is the purpose of some of the levers?" asked Phobar, with a desperate hope in his thoughts.

A FILAMENT of metal whipped to the panel from the lord of Xlarbti. "This first section duplicates the control-panel that you saw in the laboratory where you opened your eyes. Do not think that you can make use of this information—in ten minutes you will be back on your Earth to deliver our command. Between now and that moment you will be so closely watched that you can do nothing and will have no opportunity to try.

"This first lever controls the attraction rays, the second the repulsion force. The third dial regulates the orange-ray by which you will be returned to Earth. The fourth switch directs the electrical bolt that destroyed New York City. Next it is a device that we have never had occasion to use. It releases the Krangor-wave throughout Xlarbti. Its effect is to make each atom of Xlarbti, the Sthalreh metal and everything on it, become compact, to do away with the empty spaces that exist in every atom. Theoretically, it would reduce Xlarbti to a fraction of its present size, diminish its mass while its weight and gravity remained as before.

"The next lever controls matter to be transported between here and the first laboratory. Somewhat like the orange-ray, it disintegrates the object and reassembles it here."

SO that was what Phobar's captor had been trying to do with him back there in the laboratory! "Why was I not brought here by that means?" burst out Phobar.

"Because you belong to a different universe," answered Garboreggg. "Without experimentation, we cannot tell what natural laws of ours you would not be subject to, but this is one of them." A gesture of irritation seemed to come from him. "Some laws hold good in all the universes we have thus far investigated. The orange-ray, for instance, picked you up as it would have plucked one of us from the surface of Kygpton. But on Xlarbti, which is composed entirely of Sthalreh, your atomic nature and physical constitution are so different from ours that they were unaffected by the energy that ordinarily transports objects here."

Thus the metal nightmare went rapidly over the control-panel. At length Phobar's captor, or another thing like him, reentered when Garboreggg flicked a strange-looking protuberance on the panel.

"You will now be returned to your world," came the thought of Garboreggg. "We shall watch you through our cosmotel to see that you deliver our instructions. Unless the nations of Earth obey us, they will be obliterated at the end of seven days."

A wild impulse to smash that impassive, metallic monster passed from Phobar as quickly as it came.

He was helpless. Sick and despairing, he felt the cold, baffling-colored metal close around him again; once more he was borne aloft for the journey to the laboratory, from there to be propelled back to Earth.

SEVEN days of grace! But Phobar knew that less than ten minutes remained to him. Only here could he possibly accomplish anything. Once off the surface of Xlarbti, there was not the remotest chance that all the nations of Earth could reach the invaders or even attempt to defy them. Yet what could he alone do in a week, to say nothing of ten minutes?

He sensed the amused, supercilious contempt of his captor. That was really the greatest obstacle, this ability of theirs to read thought-pictures. And already he had given them enough word-pictures of English so that they could understand. . . .

In the back of Phobar's mind the ghost of a desperate thought suddenly came. What was it he had learned years ago in college? Homer—"The Odyssey"—Plutarch. . . . From rusty, disused corners of memory crept forth the half-forgotten words. He bent all his efforts to the task, not daring to think ahead or plan ahead or visualize anything but the Greek words.

He felt the bewilderment of his captor. To throw it off the track, Phobar suddenly let an ancient English nursery rime slip into his thoughts. The disgust that emanated from his captor was laughable; Phobar could have shouted aloud. But the Greek words. . . .

ALREADY the pair had left the mountain-high titan city far behind; they rippled across the smooth, black surface of Xlarbti, and bore like rifle bullets down on the swiftly-looming laboratory. In a few minutes it would be too late forever. Now the lost Greek words burst into Pholar's mind, and, hoping against hope, he thought in Greek word-pictures which his captor could not understand. He weighed chances, long shots. Into his brain flashed an idea. . . . But they were upon the laboratory; a stupendous door dissolved weirdly into shimmering haze; they sped through.

Phobar's hand clutched a bulge in his pocket. Would it work? How could it?

They were beyond the door now and racing across the great expanse of the floor, past the central tower, past the control-panel which he had first seen. . . .

And as if by magic there leaped into Phobar's mind a clear-cut, vivid picture of violet oceans of energy crackling and streaking from the heavens to crash through the laboratory roof and barely miss striking his captor behind. Even as Phobar created the image of that terrific death, his captor whirled around in a lightning movement, a long arm of metal flicking outward at the same instant to drop Phobar to the ground.

Like a flash Phobar was on his feet; his hand whipped from his pocket, and with all his strength he flung a gleaming object straight toward the fifth lever on the control-panel a dozen yards away. As a clumsy arrow would, his oversize bunch of keys twisted to their mark, clanked, and spread against the fifth control, which was the size regulator.

As rapidly as Phobar's captor had spun around, it reversed again, having guessed the trick. A tentacle of pliant metal snaked toward Phobar like a streak of flame.

But in those few seconds a terrific holocaust had taken place. As Phobar's keys spattered against the fifth lever, there came an imme-

diate, growing, strange, high whine, and a sickening collapse of the very surface beneath them. Everywhere outlines of objects wavered, changed melted, shrank with a steady and nauseatingly swift motion. The roof of the laboratory high overhead plunged downward; the far-distant walls swept inward, contracted. And the metal monsters themselves dwindled as though they were vast rubber figures from which the air was hissing.

PHOBAR sprang back as the tentacle whipped after him. Only that jump and the suddenly dwarfing dimensions of the giant saved him. And even in that instant of wild action, Phobar shouted aloud—for this whole world was collapsing, together with everything on it, except he himself who came of a different universe and remained unaffected! It was the long shot he had gambled on, the one chance he had to strike a blow.

All over the shrinking laboratory the monsters were rushing toward him. His dwindling captor flung another tentacle toward the control-panel to replace the size-regulating lever. But Phobar had anticipated that possibility and had already leaped to the switchboard, sweeping a heavy bar from its place and crashing it down on the lever so that it could not be replaced without being repaired. Almost in the same move he had bounded away again, the former hundred-foot giant now scarcely more than his own height. But throughout the laboratory, the other metal things had halted in their tasks and were racing onward.

Phobar always remembered that battle in the laboratory as a scene from some horrible nightmare. The catastrophe came so rapidly that he could hardly follow the whirlwind events. The half dozen great leaps he made from the lashing tentacles of his pursuer sufficed to give him a few seconds' respite, and then the weird, howling sound of the tortured world swelled to a piercing wail. His lungs were laboring from the violence of his exertions; again and again he barely escaped from the curling whips of metal tentacles. And now the monster was hardly a foot high; the huge condensers and tubes and colossal machinery were like those of a pygmy laboratory. And overhead the roof plunged ever downward.

But Phobar was cornered at last. He stood in the center of a circle of the foot-high things. His captor suddenly shot forth a dozen rope-like arms toward him as the others closed in. He had not even a weapon, for he had dropped the bar in his first mad bound away from the control-panel. He saw himself trapped in his own trick, for in minutes at most the laboratory would be crushing him with fearful force.

BLINDLY Phobar reverted to a primitive defense in this moment of infinite danger and kicked with all his strength at the squat monster before him. The thing tried to whirl aside, but Phobar's shoe squashed thickly through, and in a disorder of quivering pieces the metal creature fell, and subsided. Knowing at last that the invaders were vulnerable and how they could be killed, Phobar went leaping and stamping on those nearest him. Under foot, they disintegrated into little pulpy lumps of inert metal.

In a trice he broke beyond the circle and darted to the control-panel. One quick glance showed him that the roof was now scarcely a half dozen yards above. With fingers that fumbled in haste at tiny levers and dials, he spun several of them—the repulsion-ray full—the attraction-ray full. And

when they were set, he picked up the bar he had dropped and smashed the controls so that they were helplessly jammed. He could almost feel the planet catapult through the heavens.

The laboratory roof was only a foot over his head. He whirled around, squashed a dozen tiny creeping things, leaped to a disk that was now not more than a few inches broad. Stooping low, balancing himself precariously, he somehow managed to close the tiny switch. A haze of orange light enveloped him, there came a great vertigo and dizziness and pain, he felt himself falling through bottomless spaces. . . .

So exhausted that he could scarcely move, Phobar blinked his eyes open to brilliant daylight in the chill of a November Indian summer noon. The sun shone radiant in the heavens; off in the distance he heard a pandemonium of bells and whistles. Wearily he noticed that there were no flame-paths in the sky.

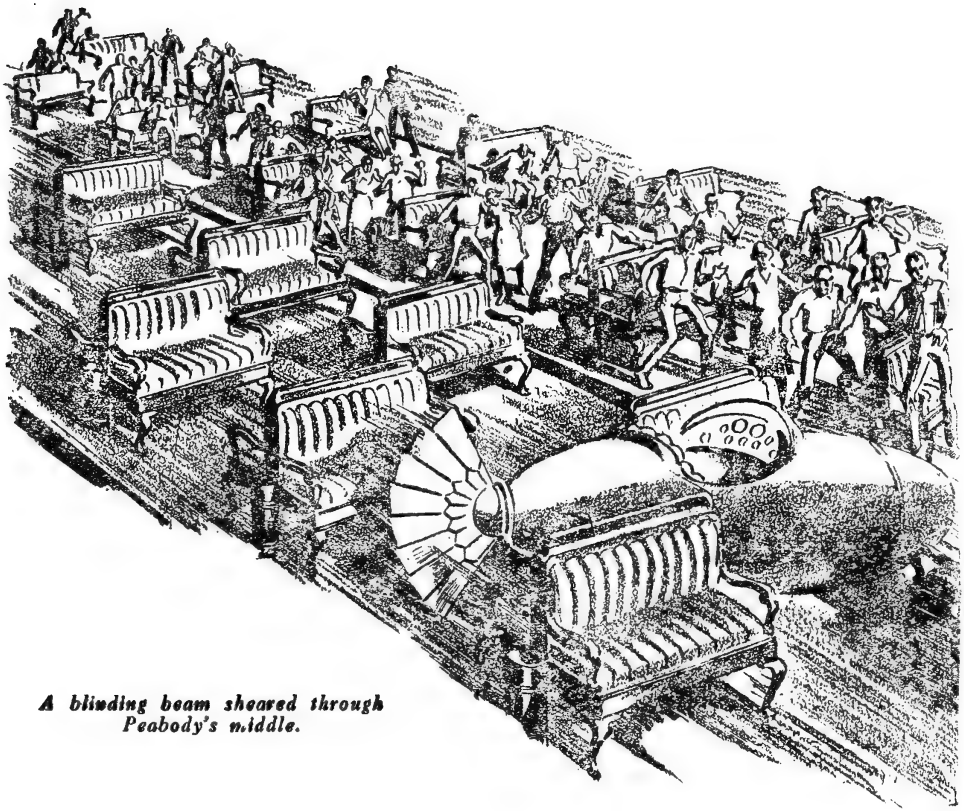
Staggering weakly, he made his way to the observatory, mounted the steps with tired limbs, and wobbled to the eyepiece of his telescope which he had left focused on the dark star two hours before. Almost trembling, he peered through it.

The dark star was gone. Somewhere far out in the abysses of the universe, a runaway world plunged headlong at ever-mounting speed to uncharted regions under its double acceleration of attraction and repulsion.

A sigh of contentment came from his lips as he sank into a heavy and profound sleep. Later he would learn of the readjustments in the solar system, and of the colder climate that came to earth, and of the vast changes permanently made by the invading planet, and of a blazing new star discovered in Orion that might signify the birth of a sun or the death of a metallic dark world.

But these were events to be, and he demanded his immediate reward of a day's dreamless slumber.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of Astounding Stories, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1932. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Edwin F. Borden, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Astounding Stories and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, W. M. Clayton, 155 E. 44th St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Harry Bates, 155 E. 44th St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, Edwin F. Borden, 155 E. 44th St., New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) The Clayton Magazines, Inc., 155 E. 44th St., New York, N. Y., W. M. Clayton, 155 E. 44th St., New York, N. Y., Nathan Goldmann, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Edwin F. Borden, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 25th day of March, 1932. Eugene A. Boast. (My commission expires March 30, 1933.)



A blinding beam sheared through Peabody's middle.

Slaves of Mercury

A Complete Novelette

By Nat Schachner

CHAPTER I

The Space Wanderer Returns

HILARY GRENDON piloted his battered, time-worn space flier, the *Vagabond,* to the smiling Earth that rose rapidly to greet it. Only the instinctive ease of long practise prevented a smash-up, his hands trembled so at the controls.

Home again—the old familiar Earth! He could scarcely believe it! Perhaps it was only a dream, and he'd wake up among the unhuman glittering cylinders of Saturn, shuddering and crawling with the iciness of their fixed regard.

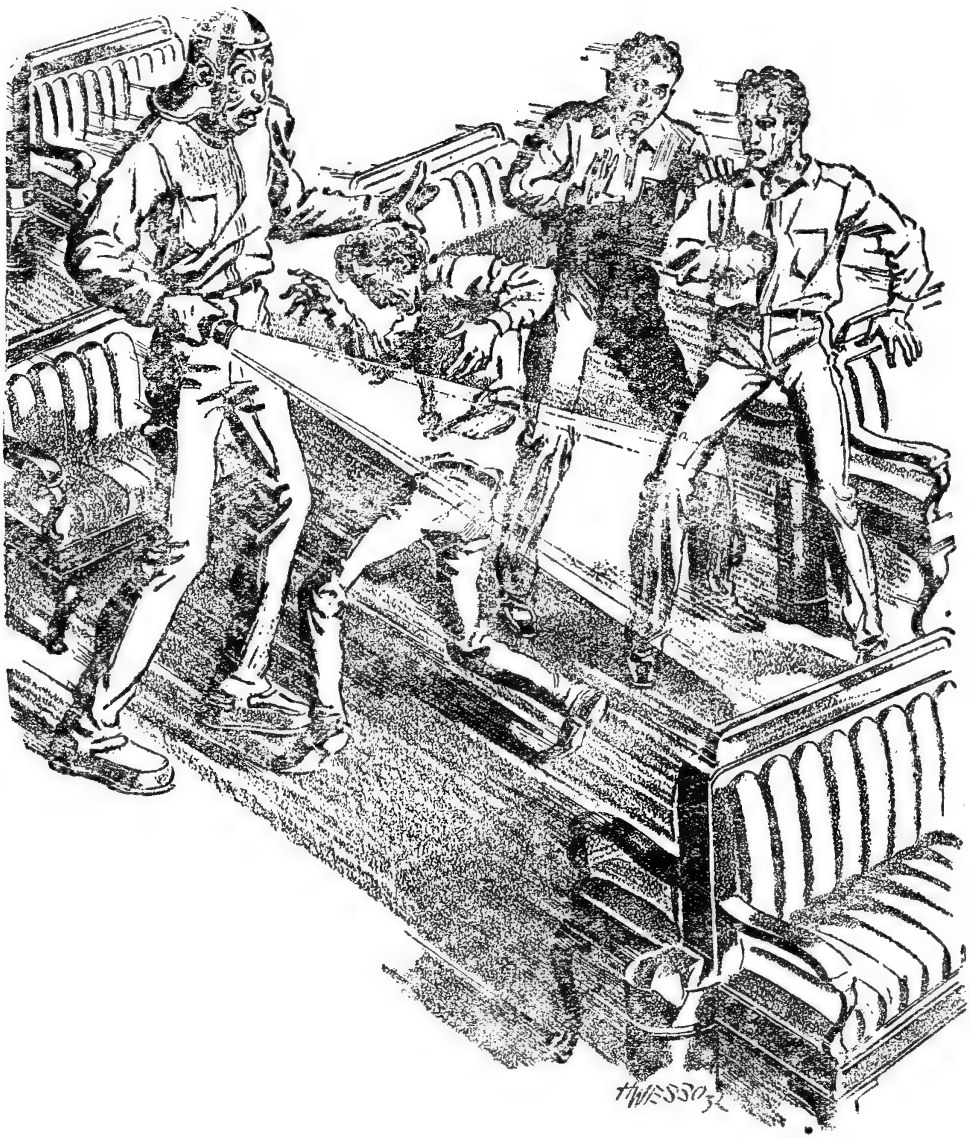
Hilary's eyes blurred with unaccustomed mistiness as he drank in the warm sunlight, the soft green of the grass and the gracious lines of the slender birches as they fluttered their leaves daintily in the unhurrying breeze. How different it all was from the harsh red angularities of Mars!

Hilary returns to find alien diskoids in Earth's stratosphere, and outworld lords patrolling her cities.

He was outside, breathing deeply, inhaling the perfumed air with delight. This was the only heaven; beyond—that far-flung immensity of planetary orbs—was hell! He, Hilary Grendon, the carefree, smiling skeptic of old, was a Fundamentalist now.

How long was it since they had started out on the first flight that man had taken into outer space—he and those stanch comrades? Five years? God! Had it been so long? Yet here he was, back on Earth again, the kindly, blessed Earth their eyes had clung to when they were fighting desperately for their lives against the protoplasmic things that inhabited Ganymede.

Hilary brushed a tear away as he thought of those brave, loyal friends. Dick lay as he fell on Saturn, transfixed by an icicle dart; Martin had been engulfed in an unholy maw on Ganymede; Dorn was a frozen idol to the spiral beings of Pluto; and poor Hurley, his fate was the worst of all: his



hideously bloated body was swinging in an orbit around Mars, a satellite through all eternity.

He, Hilary Grendon, was the sole survivor of that tremendous Odyssey!

Hilary shook his head vigorously to clear away the flood of recollections. Enough that he had returned. Then a sudden eagerness surged through him, a joyous intensity of emotion. What a story he had to relate—how the Earth people would hang with bated breath upon his adventurings! And Joan—his heart gave a queer leap at the thought of that slender ardent wisp of a girl with her shining head and steady gray eyes. She had promised to wait for him, forever, if need be. She had said it simply, without heroics; yet Hilary knew then that she would keep her promise.

A rush of impatience succeeded the inaction of his memories. He must get to New York at once. He could not wait any longer. Joan first—then Amos Peabody, the venerable President of the United States—to report his return. He smiled at the stupefaction that would greet him. No doubt he had long been given up for dead. The world had been skeptical of the space ship he had invented; had, except for a faithful few, mocked at his plans. Indignantly he had taken his calculations, his blue prints of the spheroid, along with him. If the flight was a success, well and good; if not, they would not be worth much anyway.

In spite of his fever to be off, he carefully locked the controls, sealed the outer air-lock. Hilary Grendon was a methodical man; that was the reason he had survived.

Then he struck across country, walking very fast. He knew where he was: in the wilderness of the Ramapos, some forty miles from New York. Sooner or later, he reasoned, he would strike one of the radiating conveyors that led into the metropolis, or a human being that would set him on the right track.

A HALF hour's sturdy tramping brought him out of the tangled hills into civilization. There was a glitter of metal and vitacrystal dwellings that stood foursquare to the sun and the winds. A broad ribbon-conveyor hurled its shining length in ceaseless rush down the narrow valley. Human beings—normal homely Earth men with the ordinary number of legs and arms, with honest-to-God faces and warm living flesh, were seated on the conveyor-benches as they flashed by. Hilary could have wept with delight. It was two years since he had seen his own kind; two years since Hurley's tragic misstep through the breach in the air-lock made by a meteor as they were nearing Mars.

Hilary leaped on the slow-moving ramp, skilfully worked his way across the graded speed belts until he was on the express conveyor that led straight on to New York.

He sank into a cushioned seat next to an oldish man with iron-gray hair through which the speed of their flight whipped and pulled. Hilary was bursting for real human conversation again; he grinned to himself at the excited astonishment of this impassive stranger if he should announce himself. How should he do it? Should he remark casually without any preamble: "Pardon me for addressing you, sir, but I'm Hilary Grendon, you know." Just like that, and lean back for the inevitable gasp: "What, not *the* Hilary Grendon!" And he would nod offhandedly as though he had just taken a little trip to Frisco and back.

He stole a sidelong glance at the sternly-etched profile. The man was

staring straight in front of him, looking neither to the left nor to the right. It did not seem as if he were aware of Hilary's existence. So with a sigh Hilary decided against that method of approach as a trifle too abrupt.

"Nice day to-day, isn't it?" The sound of his own voice startled him. English was an alien language to his unaccustomed tongue after the hissing syllables of the Martians.

With pathetic eagerness he awaited the inevitable answer to this commonplace introduction; that he might once more hear normal Earth tones in friendly converse, see the smile of greeting on a real Earth face.

But there came no answer. The man continued staring straight ahead, immobile, fixed. There was no slightest turn to the etched profile. It was as if he had not heard.

HILARY felt a sudden surge of anger. Damn discourteous, this first Earthman he had met. What had happened to the old hospitality? Had it passed out while he was roaming the spaces? He leaned over, harsh words tumbling for exit, when suddenly he checked himself. There was something strange about that fierce blank stare. The man's face, too, he saw now, was lined and worn; suffering had left its multitudinous imprint upon an ordinarily rotund countenance.

Hilary shouted suddenly: "Good morning." The man did not answer, nor did he stir from his unvarying pose. Deaf! The returned Earthman suffered swift pity. With gentle forefinger he prodded the man.

The reaction was astounding. The man cowered like a pricked balloon; little strangling moans forced themselves out of clenched teeth. Dumb, too! His face jerked around to the direction of Hilary's gentle prodding. Merciful heavens, the man was blind also! Two vacant red-rimmed sockets stared pitifully at him—the eyeballs were gone, ripped out.

But what struck Hilary particularly was the mortal terror that was depicted on the blind man's face. It was as though he expected some cruel, crippling blow to follow; as though it were the last straw on the back of unmentionable former agonies. Hilary shuddered. It was not good to witness such animal fear. A dark shadow blotted out the brightness of the Earth-day for him. There was something wrong here, something that required a good deal of explanation.

HIS probing eyes went thoughtfully over the poor cowering wretch. Those careworn features were familiar, somehow. Where had he seen the man before? Suddenly he stiffened, choking an exclamation. The man was bound immovably to his seat. Thin metal links, almost invisible, encircled his feet; held the elbows taut against the fluted columns of the seat-back.

Hilary's space-tanned features hardened; the light gray of his eyes darkened. All the pleasure of his homecoming vanished. The kindly Earth seemed suddenly grown inimical. What had happened in the five long years of his absence? This would have been impossible on the Earth he had known; a man, manifestly the victim of hideous tortures, bound like a wild animal to the seat of a public conveyor.

He went swiftly into action. From the depths of a capacious pocket he fished a sheathed blade of stellite, triply keen; its razor-sharp edge sawed smoothly at the bonds.

In his mounting anger Hilary had paid no attention to the scat-

tering of people occupying the cushioned chairs of the speeding conveyor. But a smothered nearby gasp caused his head to jerk up. He met the incredulous stare of a paunchy, heavy-jowled man seated some chairs away. There was more than incredulity, there was furtive fear in the small beady eyes sunken in folds of fat.

Hilary gave way to unreasoning anger.

"Stop looking like a stuck pig," he called sharply. "Give me a hand with this poor fellow."

The response was surprising. The man got up from his chair precipitately, stark panic written all over him. The sweat oozed from his shiny forehead as he backed cautiously away. He tripped over the edge of the seat behind, and fell. Once more he scrambled to his feet, and as if the fall had released his trembling muscles, he turned and ran, stumbling and dodging across the local conveyors, never once looking back.

HILARY watched his mad flight wonderingly. "Good Lord," he thought, "does my face frighten people so? Maybe I've turned into a Martian."

He turned to appeal to the others on the conveyor, and received another shock. The few men within earshot were already on their feet and moving away from there with unostentatious celerity. Hilary surveyed their receding backs thoughtfully. What was there about himself to frighten grown men out of their wits? Or was it the poor tortured wretch he was trying to release who was responsible for the exodus?

Already the express was almost clear. He saw the deserters throwing themselves guiltily into seats on the local belts, and then he was carried swiftly past. Only one man remained stubbornly in his seat, some fifteen rows back. He was a huge mountain of a man, a giant upon Earth, and there was a strangeness in his wide stare.

Hilary frowned, then shook his head, and dropped down to his task again. The blind man moaned and jerked as he felt the bite of stellite upon his fetters. Hilary made soothing sounds, forgetful that he could not hear, and worked steadily. There was a little clinking noise and the links that bound the arms fell apart. He attacked the leg shackles next.

There was a tap on Hilary's shoulder, light, electric, yet strangely heavy in its implications. Hilary turned his head sharply, saw the landscape blotted out by a huge overshadowing bulk. Five years in a hostile universe had made him cautious. He pivoted on his heels and rose in a single flowing motion, stellite blade ready for instant action.

CHAPTER II

The Strange Guard

THERE confronted him the hugest figure of a man he had ever seen. Hilary was not lacking in inches himself—he was well over six feet; but the giant staring quizzically down at him was nearer seven, with shoulders to match. The features of his face were gargantuan in their ruggedness, yet singularly open, while a pair of mild blue eyes, childlike in expression, looked in perpetual wonder out upon the world.

In spite of his annoyance, Hilary instinctively liked the giant.

"What do you want?" he inquired gruffly.

The Colossus surveyed him with his child's eyes.

"Man, you are crazy." He spoke in a deep bass rumble, without emotion or inflection. He was simply stating a fact.

A surge of annoyance swept over the returned wanderer from the far spaces. This was the last straw.

"I may be," he admitted coldly, "but I like my particular form of craziness."

"You know the penalty of course for what you are doing?" the big man inquired unemotionally.

Hilary swore deeply. "Damn the penalties, whatever you mean by that. Here's a man who has been tortured unmercifully—chained like a dog. I intend to free him."

The mild blue eyes contained the hint of a gleam.

"But you know the penalties," he repeated. His murmur sounded like the rumble of a distant earthquake.

Hilary straightened sharply, poked his finger at the midriff of the giant.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he stabbed. "What is the meaning of all this? Who is this unfortunate, and why did everyone disappear as though I had the plague when I sat next to him?"

A LOOK of bewilderment swept over the massive face, bewilderment tinged with a dawning suspicion of the questioner's sanity.

"You mean to say you don't know?" The tone held incredulity.

"I've just told you so," Hilary pointed out. He felt a growing unease.

The giant eyed him closely. "Man, where on earth have you been these last three years?"

Hilary grinned. "I haven't."

"You haven't?" echoed the other. Suspicion hardened the childlike eyes into cold flame. The man was dangerous when aroused. He thrust his jaw down at Hilary. "If you are jesting with me. . . ." He left the sentence unfinished, but the clenching of a huge fist left no doubt as to his intention.

"I am not jesting," Hilary assured him grimly. "I have been away from the Earth for five years. I've just returned."

The great hand clenched tighter. "Now I *know* you are crazy, or—Who are you?" he ended abruptly.

"Hilary Grendon."

"Hilary Grendon—Hilary Grendon," rumbled the other in manifest perplexity. It was evident the name meant nothing to him.

This then was the homecoming he had dreamed of in the unfathomable reaches of space, Hilary thought bitterly. Five short years and he was already forgotten. Then the irony of it struck him, and he laughed aloud.

"Yes," he said. "Five years ago I led the Grendon Expedition to explore interplanetary space in the space-ship I had invented. I've come back—alone."

It was amusing to watch long-overlaid memories struggling up through the subconscious. At last the giant spoke.

"Oh, yes," he said meditatively, "I seem to remember something about it." He surveyed Hilary with a new interest. "So you were one of those chaps, eh?"

The explorer admitted it, humbly. Of such are the uses of fame.

"Well, now," said the giant, "that might explain it. Though it sure beats all." And he shook his head as though he still did not understand.

"Who is that man?" Hilary stabbed a forefinger at the blind man, who sat immobile as before, his worn etched face ever to the front. "It's monstrous. Amos Peabody shall hear of it."

The Colossus looked at him mildly.

"That," he said, "*is* Amos Peabody!"

SILENCE lay like a live thing between them. Hilary whirled in a kaleidoscope of emotion. Was

this wasted, tortured being the portly, dignified President of the United States who had bade him Godspeed at the start of his tremendous journey five years before? His pitying eyes searched the lineaments of the poor wretch. There was no doubt of it now; it *was* Amos Peabody.

Hilary gripped his informant's arm. His voice was deadly calm. "I want the truth about this, and I want it fast."

"The truth," echoed the big man with strange laughter; "now that is something—"

His eyes widened over Hilary's shoulder. With a swiftness remarkable in one of his bulk he shook off Hilary's restraining grip, caught him by the shoulder and thrust him, all in one motion, into a chair several removed from Peabody. In a trice his huge bulk was safely ensconced in the adjoining one.

Hilary's hand went to the butt of the automatic within his blouse. The giant saw the movement. He leaned forward.

"Don't make a move," he warned, "the guard is coming."

"What guard?"

"You'll see fast enough. Appear unconcerned if you value your life. Don't look back."

Hilary complied. His face became an expressionless mask as he lounged in his chair, but his thoughts seethed and boiled. What terrible mystery had enveloped the Earth during his absence? Why was Amos Peabody tortured and made into a public mockery?

There was a slight whirring noise behind him. Heedful of his companion's admonition he relaxed in apparent unconcern, but his hand stole once more to the fold in his blouse. His long fingers rested caressingly upon the butt of his automatic. There were still three good Earth bullets in the chamber.

The whirring ceased. There was a slight jar as of something landing on the speeding conveyor. Yet Hilary did not look back, though his grip tightened. A heavy body stumbled toward them, cursing in strange phrases. It passed from behind, came to a halt before the giant. Hilary shot a sharp glance upward from under veiled lids. An exclamation sprang full-throated to his lips, died unheard under a tremendous effort of his will.

BEFORE them stood a being—it could not be called a man. He was no denizen of the Earth, that was evident, yet Hilary had visited all the planets outward from our own without encountering such a monster.

He hulked before them like a behemoth, even dwarfing Hilary's companion with his enormous stature; but it was noticeable that he supported his weight ill, as if Earth's gravitation were too strong for him. Manlike he was in every essential, but the skin of his face was a pasty dull gray, and ridged and furrowed with warty excrescences. Two enormous pink eyes, unlidded, but capable of being sheathed with a filmy membrane, stared down at them with manifest suspicion. A gray, three-fingered hand held an angled tube significantly. A lens gleamed transparent in the sunlight from the open end.

Hilary did not move under the stare, nor did his companion. The mild blue eyes were childlike as ever. The guard's gaze shifted from them to the trembling figure of Amos Peabody. He bent over him, thrust at him with ungentle hand. The automatic under Hilary's fingers crept farther out from the blouse, but a warning gesture from his companion stopped him.

The guard amused himself with shaking the blind man; then he bent suddenly. He had seen the broken links. With ominous de-

liberation he turned his vast weight upon them. His baleful pink eyes fastened upon Hilary's companion.

"You!" he growled throatily, "what do you know about this?" He spoke in English, but it was obviously not his native tongue.

Mildly innocent was the giant's face.

"I know nothing, Magnificent," he said humbly. "I am on my way to Great New York on my own insignificant affairs, and I bother my head with nothing else."

"The bonds of this dog, Peabody, have been severed," the guard insisted, "and recently, too. Speak up, Earthman, or—you know the penalty."

"I know the penalty," he answered respectfully, "but I have been seated here only five minutes, and I know nothing of this Peabody."

The guard fingered his tube.

"Let me see your tag," he said suddenly.

THE other opened his blouse obediently and exposed a thin copper disk suspended on his chest. The guard tugged at it brutally to bring it within range of his vision. The pull jerked the giant's head forward, and the thin metal strand cut cruelly into the back of his neck. Hilary saw a flush of red sweep like a wave up to his forehead, and the mild blue eyes turned hard like glinting blue pebbles. But not a word escaped his lips.

"Grim Morgan," the guard read, "A46823 Great New York. Pah, what barbarous names you Earthmen have." He shoved the giant back heavily into his seat, and turned his baleful glare upon Hilary.

"You, what do you know about this?"

Grim Morgan interposed hastily. "Nothing, Magnificent. He came on the express conveyor after I did."

The guard's free hand went back. Very deliberately he struck him across the face with three ridged fingers. An angry welt raised.

"That will teach you to keep your mouth shut when not spoken to."

The big man's eyes were mild, but his hands tensed as though they were curled around a throat. He said nothing.

The guard turned to Hilary again. "Answer me," he barked.

"My friend told the truth," Grendon said simply.

"Your tag?"

"I have none."

Suspicion flared openly in the pink eyes.

"Where is it?"

"I never had one."

"Ah!" There was a world of meaning to the exhalation. "You know of course that every Earthman must be registered. The penalty for non-obedience is—death."

The angled tube came up with the swiftness of light. Grim Morgan cried out sharply, lunged out of his seat. Hilary tore at his gun, knowing sickeningly that the draw would be slower than the action of the strange weapon in the guard's hand.

There was a sneer on the monster as he pressed something on the tube. Hilary's automatic was only half out of his blouse. Grim's lunge would never reach in time. He was too far away.

CHAPTER III

The Death of Amos Peabody

JUST how any inkling of what was happening penetrated the pain-swept consciousness of the blind and deaf President could never be determined. Possibly a thin repercussion of Grim's cry, possibly an intuition that comes to sense-bereft men. But he had jerked spasmodically erect. There was a

sharp tinkling as the weakened leg links broke. He threw himself in a queer, awkward movement forward, directly in the path of the tubed weapon. A blinding beam flashed out of the orifice, sheared through Peabody's middle as though he were cut cleanly in half with a gigantic knife. He toppled in two sections to the floor of the conveyor—released from all humiliation, all suffering.

At the same time two other things happened. Grim Morgan hit the guard like a crashing thunderbolt and Hilary's gun barked once. The monster tottered under the impact. A puzzled expression flitted over his pinkish eyes, a filmy sheath spread over them like a veil, and he fell heavily, a neat bullet hole square between his eyes.

Hilary shoved the gun back in his blouse, and stared alternately at the huddled form of the grotesque being and all that remained of Amos Peabody. The old President had saved his life at the cost of his own. Instinctively his hand went up in formal salute to the gallant old man.

Grim Morgan shook him by the shoulder.

"Man," he said quietly, "we have killed a Mercutian guard. Within the hour we shall be dead men too."

Hilary looked up at him sharply.

"A Mercutian," he echoed. "You mean—"

"That for three years now the Earth has been a conquered province of these devils from Mercury," Grim interposed swiftly. "We have committed the unforgivable offense and must pay for it."

HILARY glanced swiftly around. The express conveyor was clear of passengers for over a hundred yards each way. All the people within range had cleared off when Hilary had attempted to release Peabody. The small figure of a man got up from his chair beyond the charmed circle, and was threading his way forward. The local conveyors seemed to be moving backward at graded speeds. Beyond was the open country, gradually thickening into scattered rows of crystal buildings. They were in the suburbs of Great New York. Within ten minutes the conveyor terminal would be reached.

Hilary's eyes flicked speculatively to the tiny cigar-shaped boat in which the dead guard had flown down to them. Its smooth gray-gleaming surface was devoid of wings or other lifting devices. Only a fan-shaped fin projected from the stern like the tail of a fish. The cockpit, if such it could be called, was tiny, just ample enough to accommodate the Mercutian's girth. The sunlight dazzled back from a bewildering jumble of tiny lenses inset in the instrument board. Arranged along the hull, on either side, were larger disks of the same quartz-like material.

"Let's get away in the flier," he said.

"Can't," Grim said. "Those lenses you see on the instrument board are the controls. No one knows how to operate them except the Mercutians. Our people managed to capture a few, but couldn't do a thing with them."

Hilary stared at the motionless flier with interest. "What are those round glass disks stretched along the hull in a double row?" he asked. "They look like burning glasses."

"That's just what they are," said Grim sadly. "The top row are sun-lenses, that throw a terrible ray for a distance of two to three hundred feet. Melts everything in its path—men, trees, rocks even. You saw one in action in the sun-tube with which poor old Peabody was cut in half. The lower row of lenses on the flier are search beams."

"Search beams?" Hilary echoed inquiringly.

"Yes. They act like X-rays, more powerful though, and with the further property of rendering everying they touch transparently crystal for depths of ten to fifteen feet. Lead is the only element they can not penetrate. Another secret our scientists can not fathom, so they talk learnedly about the stream of rays polarizing the structure of matter along a uniaxis."

"Can't those lenses be duplicated, and turned as weapons against the Mercutians?"

"No. They are made of a peculiar vitreous material native to Mercury."

"And no one has found out the principle on which they work?"

"Well, there have been theories. We haven't many scientists left, you know. But the most popular one is that these lenses have the power of concentrating the rays of the sun to an almost infinite degree, and then spreading them out again, each individual beam with the concentrated energy of the whole. Some new way of rearranging quanta of energy."

"Hmm!" Hilary's brow was wrinkled. For a long moment he stared and thought.

AT last he snapped back to their present situation: the dead guard at their feet, the dismembered body of Amos Peabody, the cowed groups of Earthmen on the speeding conveyors, keeping respectful distances.

"We'd better start moving if we want to get away," he said.

"It's no use." Grim spread his hands resignedly. "We'll have to take our medicine."

Hilary flared angrily. "You're talking nonsense. What's to prevent us from hopping to another platform? There is no other Mercutian in sight."

"No, but there were plenty of Earthmen who saw us."

"They won't tell."

"Oh, won't they?" Grim shook his head quietly. "You don't realize what has happened. Their spirit has been crushed until they are actually slavish in soul as well as in body. They fought bravely enough on the first invasion. Even after the conquest there were plenty of men looking for an opportunity to fight them again. Amos Peabody headed the revolt. It was smothered in blood, so effectually that only slaves are left. Peabody was left as a horrible warning. He was sent from city to city to be exhibited to the populace, unattended on the way, so confident were the Mercutians of the terror they had inspired."

"So you think those Earthmen who saw us will report to their masters," Hilary said slowly.

Grim nodded.

"I know it—they'll expect to curry favor in return."

Hilary felt a web of circumstance tighten around him. His jaw tautened. Thank the Lord he had been away—on his own. He had not the soul of a slave—yet.

"Won't you fight for your life?" he asked the big man curiously.

A spark lit in the mild blue eyes, died down.

"Yes, if there were a chance," he said dully. "But there is none. The whole Earth is honeycombed with their guards. They have fliers, sun weapons, invisible search beams. We'd never elude them."

Hilary snorted impatiently. "We have good Earth brains, haven't we? I've traveled all the outer planets and never met any intelligence equal to that of a man, and I won't admit for a moment that the Mercutians are any exceptions."

A man stepped casually onto the express, took one startled look at the dead guard, at them, and fled precipitately back.

"ANOTHER one to spread the alarm," Morgan said grimly. "There'll be a dozen guards dropping down on us in the next five minutes."

"Let's get going then." Hilary was pulling the big man along by main force when he heard a movement in back of them. He stopped, whirled, automatic thrusting its blue nose forward.

The little man who had gotten up before on the express was pushing rapidly toward them.

"Stop." Hilary's voice was harsh with command.

But the little man did not heed. He literally stumbled in his haste, crying: "You've killed a Mercutian."

"What of it, my bantam?" Hilary inquired softly, the muzzle of his gun boring into a lean flat stomach. The little man was actually pressing against the automatic in his excitement.

"What of it?" he shrilled excitedly. "God, all this time I've been waiting to find someone with guts enough to smash one of them. Sir, I'm proud to shake your hand."

He reached over the wicked-looking muzzle, gripped Hilary's fist, still tight on the gun butt, and pumped vigorously. He dropped the hand, swerved on Grim.

"And you too, sir." His little fingers were engulfed in a mighty paw. "I saw it all, I tell you," he babbled. "We've got them on the run. We'll sweep the filthy devils clean off the Earth. We'll annihilate them."

"Whoa there, my little gamecock," Morgan grinned down at the excited little man. "One Mercutian doesn't make a Roman holiday. They're plenty more where he came from. You'd better clear out before they come, or you'll be included in the party."

The little fellow—he was not much more than five feet no inches tall—drew himself up to his full height. "What," he ejaculated, "me desert my friends? Wat Tyler's never had that said of him yet. We stick together, to hell and back again."

Hilary grinned as he slipped the weapon back into his blouse. He was beginning to like this little firebrand. In truth, Grim had rather fairly described him as a gamecock. His stature, the bristly red hair that flamed above a freckled face, the lightest of blue eyes that snapped with excitement, the peculiar strut of him.

"You'll do," he said briefly.

AT a safe distance a crowd was gathering, a crowd of Earthmen. Grim surveyed them carefully. They were milling back and forth, but no one dared come closer. "Slaves," he grunted, "not a spark left in them." His eyes swept the heavens. Two faint black specks appeared in the blue distance, from the direction of Great New York.

"They're coming for us," he said quietly.

"Let them," crowed the fiery little bantam, "we'll meet them man to man."

He wrenched the tube from the stiffened fingers of the dead guard, swung it exultingly aloft.

"You little fool," Hilary cried sharply, and struck it down again. "We're not waiting for them. That's suicide. Come. I'm afraid it's too late for you to turn back now. You've been seen with us."

He dashed across the moving belts, Grim and Wat, a grotesquely assorted pair, directly behind him.

Passengers, men and women both, scattered at their approach, stark, servile fear smothering their dulled countenances. Cries arose on all sides. "The Magnificents are coming."

The black specks became larger, forming themselves into swift one-

man fliers. The three men pelted across the graded conveyors as hard as they could run. No Earthman tried to stop them; one look at their grim faces would have been a most potent dissuader. And fortunately there were no Mercutians within hailing distance other than the rapidly nearing fliers.

They flung themselves off the last slow-moving platform, panting.

"Which way now?" Hilary asked. His quick eye raked the scene for possible hideouts. They were on a smoothly clipped lawn, heaving gently up to a pretty rambling structure, built on an antique design, pleasingly irregular and nestling to the ground as though it were indigenous to the soil. The walls were modern, though, of vita-crystal, which possessed the peculiar property of permitting *all* of the beneficial rays of the sun to penetrate, and yet presented a perfectly opaque appearance to the outside world.

No other hiding place was in sight. The lawn stretched smooth on all sides except for a scattering of trees—poor enough cover. The Mercutians were almost directly overhead now, preparing to swoop.

"OUR only chance seems to be the house," Hilary answered his own question quietly.

Grim shook his head. "Their search beams can penetrate the vita-crystal walls as though they were transparent glass."

Hilary's heart sank. "Can't help it," he said laconically. "Come on."

The three men broke into a run. It was only a hundred yards, but the Mercutians were coming down fast. They had been seen. A flash as of molten metal gleamed overhead. A blinding ray leaped for the ground, struck viciously a little ahead of the running men. The velvet green grass crisped to ash; the soil underneath scorched.

"Scatter!" Hilary shouted.

Instantly the men spread out. Another blast hissed down at them, so close to Hilary that the heat seared his left side like a red-hot iron. The Mercutians were getting the range. Wat Tyler stopped short with a howl of defiance. He whipped the hand tube he had taken from the dead guard out of his blouse.

"Hide it, you fool!" Hilary yelled back at him. "We don't want them to know we are armed."

Wat obeyed reluctantly. He shook his fist high in the air, and started to run again. It was not an instant too soon, either. A beam slithered down the smoldering air, and the Earth literally boiled under its impact, directly on the spot where Wat had stopped to shake his fist. All about them the terrible rays were slashing now.

But a last desperate burst of speed carried the Earthmen onto a wide enclosed portico, in the old manner. Hilary pounded on the vita-crystal door. It was tightly locked.

"STEP back a moment," Morgan rumbled.

Hilary obeyed. The big man spat thoughtfully upon his hands, worked his shoulders tentatively. Then he too retreated to the outermost edge of the portico. Above, the crystal suddenly shattered. Sharp-edged fragments showered down upon them. There was little time to waste.

Grim heaved forward in a slanting rush, right shoulder extended. He crashed into the locked door like a runaway train. There was a grinding noise, a smash of crystal, and his shoulder was through, incased in a halo of bright, sharp edges.

The big man staggered back, his shoulder streaming blood from a hundred cuts. His face was pale and drawn.

"Good fellow," Wat yelled, "even though you *are* an overgrown ox." He darted in behind the man-mountain like a twisting snake. His deft fingers reached in through the shattered crystal, pressed something on the inside. The door slid into its wall pocket with a sound of grinding glass.

Wat burst into the opened room first, Grim right behind him. Hilary brought up the rear, Grim's great bulk blotting out for the moment any view of the interior.

There was a sudden gasp—a girl's voice.

"Wh— What does this mean?" She was tremulous, yet unafraid.

Hilary stopped suddenly as though brought up against a solid wall. His heart pounded madly. That voice—but it was utterly impossible!

Wat answered, gallantly. "Sorry to annoy you, miss, but they're after us. My partner here's wounded."

"Oh, you poor man." There was quick sympathy in the clear tones. "But who is after you?"

A splintering crash resounded outside.

"The Mercutians, as you no doubt hear," the little man responded with faint irony.

The girl gasped again. "Oh my God!"

There was silence. Hilary strained his ears, yet took care to keep hidden behind Grim's huge frame. What would she do now? It seemed to him as if the whole world depended on her reply.

The girl broke the silence. She had come to a swift decision.

"They must not get you. Go upstairs, quietly, into the chamber on the left of the hall. It's my bedroom. Their search beams can not penetrate it; the walls are draped with lead-encrusted curtains. I'll stay down here and try to throw them off the trail."

Hilary's heart recommenced beating. A gush of joy overwhelmed him. The girl had proven herself.

Grim spoke, for the first time.

"You know the penalty of course, for hiding us."

She did not answer directly. "I can't help it. I can't surrender Earthmen to those beasts. Besides"—there was a catch in her voice—"it does not matter much since—"

Hilary stepped quietly from behind Grim's overshadowing bulk.

The girl's eyes went wide at the sight of him; her slender white hand flew to her throat. She looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"You—you!" she choked. "Hilary!"

SHE swayed and would have fallen, had Hilary not jumped to catch her. His heart was beating thickly with excess of emotion. Joan Robbins in his arms again—how he prayed for this moment in the icy reaches of interplanetary space. Yet what was she doing here in Bronxville? Her home had always been atop the windswept Robbins Building in Great New York.

Her hand went softly over his features, as though to assure herself that it was really he.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered brokenly, "I had almost given up all hope. Everyone was certain you were lost—long ago."

Whirrings sounded outside.

"Sorry to break up your reunion," Grim interrupted in his bass rumble, "but the Mercutians have landed on the lawn. They'll be in here right away."

Joan tore herself out of Hilary's arms. Her slim straight figure tautened; her velvet soft eyebrows puckered over deep-lit pools.

"Upstairs quickly, all of you," she cried. "I'll manage them somehow."

Hilary said quietly. "I won't

leave you alone with those brutes. You go along up, and I'll remain here." The automatic gleamed in his hand.

"No, no," she panted, "you mustn't. You wouldn't have a chance. Leave it to me." She literally pushed them with her little hands to the stairway. "Go, if you love me."

"The girl's right," Grim said, "there's a chance. If not," he shrugged his shoulders, "we can always come down again."

Outside were heavy thuddings on the portico.

"You in there," a heavy alien voice resounded, "open or we blast our way in." The door had been slid back into position.

There was no room for further argument. Very reluctantly Hilary followed his companions up the winding stairway.

At the top of the stairs an entrance slide showed darker on the left. Wat fumbled for a moment until he found the button. The door whirred open, even as they heard Joan's clear voice below: "Come in, Magnificents!" There was a trampling of feet.

CHAPTER IV

The Kidnaping of Joan

THE Earthmen moved quickly and quietly into Joan's room. Thin crinkly draperies of heavy silk impregnated with lead in colloidal solution, covered all the walls, the door itself. But Hilary shot no more than a cursory glance around; he had left the slide slightly ajar; he was listening intently. The gun was in his hand. There were only two bullets in the chambers—all that were left of the thousands of rounds the expedition had started out with. He must not waste them.

The thick rough voice of a Mercutian floated up from below.

"Three Earth slaves came in here. Where did they go?"

"They did," Joan admitted readily. "They frightened me out of my wits. I screamed and they ran through the house and out the back way."

The Mercutian was suspicious.

"Hmm. Funny there's no sign of a struggle here. Nothing is upset."

"They ran out the back way," the girl repeated tonelessly.

"We'll see; but if you are lying. . . ." He said no more, but the pause was significant in its implications.

"I would not lie to the Magnificents."

"Not if you are wise." He seemed to be the leader. He evidently turned to his companion, for there issued a flood of throaty consonants to which the other grunted once. Then the listeners heard his heavy stamping as he walked through the house to the rear. A door whirred; he had gone out.

THE remaining Mercutian said suddenly: "He won't find them."

"Why not?" Joan asked, a bit tremulously.

The Mercutian laughed harshly. "Because you lied. You've hid them in the house."

Hilary heard Joan's sudden sharp intake of breath.

"No, no, Magnificent," she cried.

The Mercutian laughed again—a hard cruel laugh. There was no mirth in it.

"All Earthwomen are liars. I know where you hid them. In your bed chamber. The trick is too old already. We may not be able to see through the lead curtains, but we can break down the door. I warned Artok not to permit the use of the lead curtains, but he has a soft streak. He listened to the women's pleadings for privacy.

Privacy, pah! A cloak for conspiracies, that's all it comes to. When Gurda returns, we search upstairs and drag out your rats from their hole."

He laughed smugly, pleased with his own cleverness.

"It is not so." Strange how calm Joan sounded. "They are not in the house. Only my dying mother is here. She is bedded upstairs. The doctor ordered absolute quiet. The slightest noise would be fatal."

The Mercutian sneered. "We'll take a look at that dying mother of yours right now."

"You mustn't," the girl panted. "She will die, I tell you."

"And what does it matter to me?"

There was the sound of a struggle, a sharp cry, followed by a dull thud.

HILARY was out through the door like a flash, down the corridor to the head of the stairs with automatic extended. The monster Mercutian was coming heavily up the treads. They saw each other simultaneously.

The Mercutian's pink eyes turned a vicious red; the tube dangling in his hand jerked sharply up. Hilary squeezed the trigger. The gun barked. The Mercutian spun half around with the force of the tearing bullet. The deadly beam from his weapon slithered over the wall, searing a great molten gash in the crystal. He was badly hurt, but he did not fall. Howling with pain and rage, he slewed himself around again, pointed his sun weapon unsteadily upward.

Hilary let him have the other slug. The big body jerked, and fell backward with a crash to the bottom of the stairs, there to lie oddly contorted and still.

There was a thundering rush from the rear of the lower floor, a hoarse throaty cry. Hilary tore down the steps three at a time, Grim and Wat slithering behind him.

The other Mercutian was bending over Joan's semiconscious form, sweeping her into the crook of a huge arm. He shot a startled glance at the down-pouring Earthmen, swerved the girl around, and aimed his tube.

Hilary pulled the trigger as he swerved. There was a sharp click, but no explosion. Hilary cursed and threw himself down. He had forgotten that there were no more bullets. The speeding flash scorched overhead.

Grim and Wat crouched low. Wat's tube, the one he had wrested from the dead guard on the conveyor, was being slowly raised. The Mercutian saw it, shifted the inanimate girl in front of himself, and backed stealthily toward the splintered door.

"Don't shoot," Hilary cried sharply. "You'll kill Joan."

Wat lowered the tube disgustedly. Hilary groaned aloud. If only he had had one more bullet. There was enough of the gigantic body exposed to offer an excellent target to a steel slug without harming Joan, but the sun weapon sent out its beam in a flat spray.

The Mercutian sensed their dilemma as they crouched on the stairs. He laughed unpleasantly as he backed through the doorway, Joan's limp body held straight in front of him.

"Good-by, Earth slaves," he taunted. "I take your pretty Earth maiden with me. In five minutes I return, with others. You cannot escape. Good-by."

He jumped clumsily through the door. The crouching Earthmen heard a click. It had closed behind him.

HILARY and his companions cleared the stairs in almost a single bound. He had snatched the sun-tube out of Wat's hand. Through the splintered slide he saw the Mercutian climbing into his flier, but a great crystal column of the portico intervened. Nevertheless, while Wat fumbled for the button that released the slide, he took a chance. Every split second was precious now. He aimed the weapon, pressed the spring. A white dazzling ray darted fanwise from the orifice. It touched the column, fused it into molten, running glass. But the Mercutian was already in his seat, Joan limp beside him. He was fumbling at the controls.

The door slid open at last. Hilary shot through like a bullet from a rifle. The flier had already taken off on a long slanting rise. A three-fingered hand waved mockingly down at him. Hilary raised his weapon, then lowered it with a groan. The flier was well within range yet, but if he aimed the terrible beam at it, there would be a crash of fused twisted material, and—Joan was in it. What a dilemma! If he didn't shoot, she would be borne away—he dared not think to what horrible fate.

Grim's hand rested lightly on his shoulder as he watched the flier become a faint black speck in the direction of Great New York.

"She was your sweetheart." His gruff voice was oddly gentle.

Hilary brushed a weary hand over his forehead. The Earth, the universe itself, were suddenly dead, meaningless gobs of matter.

"Yes," he said tonelessly. "Five years ago she promised to wait for my return. She kept her word. I found her again—only to lose her."

Grim said quietly: "I too once loved a girl. I joined the last rebellion under Amos Peabody. The Mercutians threatened to seize the wives, sisters, sweethearts of the revolters if they persisted. Many of the men surrendered. I was one of those who refused. When the revolt was over, smothered in flame from their giant sun-tubes, I found that they had made good their threats. My girl was gone, vanished. Two Mercutians had taken her away. She was never found again."

He paused in brooding silence. "They are up to their old tricks again." His eyes were steely blue now. Hilary pressed his hand in silence. They were welded together by a common loss.

Wat Tyler broke in upon them. "If you fellows want to hang around here, I'll be on my way. That Mercutian hyena will be back here with a dozen others just like him in less than no time."

HILARY snapped out of his sorrow. He could not help Joan by having himself captured or killed, nor was it fair to Grim and Wat. They had placed themselves unquestioningly under his leadership. Something else too was growing into burning life in his mind. This was his Earth, his and Grim's and Wat's, and of millions of other normal human beings. The Mercutians were interlopers, brutal conquerors. He would devote his now otherwise meaningless life to driving them off the planet, wiping them out of the solar system. A tall order, yes, but not for nothing had he fought almost single-handed against those other monstrosities on other worlds: Martians, Ganymedans, Saturnians. The Mercutians were no stronger than they. Besides, there was Joan.

"Men," he said crispy, once more the clear-headed commander of his space expedition, "I in-

tend to fight these Mercutian invaders until Earth is free once more, or—I am dead. I have no illusions about the magnitude of the job, of its practical hopelessness. But that does not mean that you two have to throw away your lives also. I am a marked man, without any identification tag. You on the other hand, can get away from here, mingle indistinguishably with the hordes of people in Great New York. You would be safe. Our ways part here, if you desire it so." He added hastily. "I would be the last to blame you."

Grim Morgan and Wat Tyler looked at each other, a great giant of a man and an undersized bantam. Yet some electric spark of sympathy seemed to dart between them, these so dissimilar beings.

Wat elected to be the spokesman. His voice rose shrilly, as it always did when he was laboring under stress of excitement or emotion.

"*You* won't blame us," he almost squeaked. "Who asked you? Damn it, haven't we consciences of our own? Are we quitters, yellow-bellied Mercutians to quit a pal? Are we, Grim Morgan? Speak, you big ox."

He wheeled abruptly and shook a small fist high in the air. It barely reached under Grim's nose. The big man looked down at the little gamecock unsmilingly.

"No, Wat Tyler, we are not," he said gravely.

Wat turned to Hilary triumphantly.

"There, you see," he crowed, "we stick together. We'll lick those Mercutian monsters; we'll sweep them into the ocean, into space. And what's more, we'll rescue your girl too." He stopped to catch his breath. Grim was nodding slowly. He had not the little man's exuberance. *His* girl could not be rescued any more, but he could remember.

Hilary's frozen heart warmed into life again. With loyal comrades such as there, even the impossible might be accomplished. Very quietly, without heroics, the three men shook hands. Nothing more, yet they knew that they were bound indissolubly together, as long as there was a gasp of breath in any of them.

HILARY'S brain functioned with racing smoothness. In minutes the Mercutians would be back.

"We must find a secure hiding place at once," he said. "Know of any?"

Grim shook his head negatively. "There is none," he spoke slowly. "Their search beams penetrate everything."

"Except lead," Hilary interposed.

"Except lead," he conceded.

"Very well then. We shall have to find a place we can line with lead. In the meantime, I have my space flier up in the Ramapos. If it hasn't been discovered yet, it will be essential to our task. We'll have to get there quickly."

"How?" Wat asked.

"By the conveyors, of course."

"No good," the little man declared. "Mercutian guards will be patrolling them. You have no identification tag. You would be caught."

Hilary considered that. "Suppose you two go on along," he suggested. "Find it and wait for me. I'll manage somehow."

"No," they answered unanimously; "we go together or not at all."

Hilary did not try to argue. He would have replied himself in exactly the same terms. He looked longingly at the abandoned flier of the gray-faced Mercutian, lying cold and still within the house.

"If only we could operate the ship," he said.

Then, characteristically, he dismissed the vain longing and bent to the business in hand. "That means we'll have to make it on foot, and keep under cover all the way. Come on."

As the three men moved rapidly over the great lawn toward the nearest covert, a little wood a quarter of a mile away, the horizon that was Great New York showed silhouetted against the westering sun numerous little black dots. The Mercutians were coming.

CHAPTER V

Outlaws of Earth

THREE days later three footsore, weary, hungry men skulked in the edge of the woods near a little clearing in the Ramapos. For three days they had ducked and dodged and literally burrowed into the ground by day, traveling only at night. Above and around them the noise of pursuit rolled. The Mercutians were persistent.

Speedy one-man fliers patrolled the airways, their search beams casting invisible rays in wide sweeping arcs over the uneven terrain. Wherever they touched, the ground sprang into vivid illumination, crystal clear to depths of ten to fifteen feet. Several times the crystal swath swept breathlessly close to the place where the fugitives crouched in covert. The conveyors carried back and forth armed companies of guards. The Mercutians were making a mighty effort to capture their prey.

But somehow the Earthmen had won through, and eager eyes searched the little glade. Hilary exhaled sharply. The *Vagabond*, stanch and faithful companion of all his travels, rested immovably on the deep green grass. It had escaped the questing eyes of the Mercutians. The travel lanes did not touch this secluded spot.

"So that's your space ship, eh?" said Grim, surveying the tarnished, pitted spheroid with something of awe.

"Yes," said Hilary lovingly as he unlocked the outer port slide. A hasty glance around inside showed that nothing had been touched. Everything was orderly, methodical, just as he had left it.

Grim and Wat examined with interest the banked controls, the polarization apparatus that set up repulsion waves and literally kicked the ship out into space away from the planet against which it had been set.

"Time enough to inspect," Hilary warned them. "Never can tell when those damned Mercutians may spy on us."

HE set the polarization controls so that the mere pulling of a switch would send the flier careening off into space. He surveyed the apple-pie order of the interior with vast satisfaction.

"Now let them come," he said, "the *Vagabond* can show anything that flies a clean pair of heels. Let's eat."

He dragged an aluminum box out of its locker, opened it to disclose a gray funguslike mass. He cut off huge slices and offered it to his companions.

They looked at it doubtfully.

"Ugh," Wat shuddered violently, "I never saw stuff like that before. It doesn't look good." The little man, they soon discovered, had violent discriminations in food.

"Try it," Hilary assured him. "It's a Martian growth, and delicious. We had to live on the land, so to speak, on our journey. Our Earth food gave out long before the finish."

Wat looked at it with manifest distaste, but Grim was already wolfing his portion and making little pleased sounds. Wat bit into a portion gingerly, found it tasted somewhat like truffles, and soon was not far behind in gulping it down.

WHEN their appetites had been appeased, Hilary called a council of war.

"First of all," he told them, "we'll have to find a hideout. That presupposes two things: a place large enough to store the *Vagabond,* and hidden from view, either from the naked eye or their search beams."

"That sounds like a large cavern lined with lead," said Grim.

"Exactly."

"And there are none such in this territory," Grim replied quietly.

"I will not move too far from New York," Hilary spoke with determination; "there is Joan. . . ."

Grim looked blank. There was Joan, of course.

Wat got up suddenly. "I know a place," he said, "within a mile of here, and it's not a cave. Come on; I'll show you. I was a Ranger in the Ramapo Game Preserve in the old days."

Hilary asked no more. The polarization switch made contact, and the *Vagabond* left the Earth with a swift rush. It maneuvered with the ease of an Earth flier. Wat directed him, scanning the rugged tree-clad mountains with eager eye.

"There," he said finally, "set her down right there. Easy."

Hilary saw no break in the uninterrupted line of the mountain, but he followed directions. He had come to have an abounding faith in the little red-haired man.

The space flier eased gently down. Just as it seemed as if it would perforce come to rest upon serrated tree tops, a faint glimmer showed amid the darker green. There was an opening, just barely room for the *Vagabond.*

HILARY jockeyed skilfully through, kept on descending into a narrow cleft in the slope. The walls rose almost perpendicularly on either side. About fifty feet down there was a sharp turn and the gorge angled downward for another fifty feet. When the flier came to rest at the bottom, it was securely hidden in a slanting cleft, some forty feet wide and several hundred long. A mountain brook brawled at one side, assuring plentiful water. The outside world was absolutely invisible. Perpetual twilight reigned; only a pale dim religious light filtered through.

"Just the thing," Wat exulted. "We'll never be found here, no matter how much they search, unless someone actually stumbles into the opening. There's almost eighty feet of solid rock above us, and their search beams only penetrate about ten to fifteen."

"Splendid," Hilary said. "Now we've got to get to work."

For two days they toiled incessantly. A rope ladder was fabricated to insure ease of entrance and exit without recourse to the ship. Wat, as the least conspicuous, was delegated to scour the countryside and bring in stores of provisions. The bottom of the gorge was leveled off with infinite labor. Rough wood shelters were erected. Spares and electrical equipment to replace worn parts in the *Vagabond* were also purchased by Wat, in cautious small purchases. It necessitated long trekking through mountain trails, but there was no murmur from him. The search, he reported, seemed to be slackening. Only the routine guards whizzed by on the conveyors, and the usual Mercutian fliers that kept to the regular air lanes.

At last even Hilary was satisfied. He was ready now for the plan that had been slowly forming in his mind during the days of their flight and of work. He was going to attempt a rescue of Joan. She had never left his thoughts once; he was burning with inward anxiety, though his face was a mask to cover his true feelings.

THE last evening he sat with the others within one of the wooden shelters. A huge fire of fragrant pine knots blazed up a crude boulder chimney.

"I am going out now to find Joan," he told them quietly.

"When do we start?" asked Wat.

"I am going alone." There was a movement of protest. He checked it at once. "You can understand the reasons. One man can worm his way where three men cannot. It isn't a question of force, of brute strength. Besides, if anything should go wrong, there are still the two of you to carry on—to be the focus of a new revolt. If all of us were caught, there would be no further hope for the Earth."

"It's a hell of a note," Wat grumbled, unconvinced. "There's fighting to be done, and me cooped up here like a sick hen."

"Hilary's right," Grim interposed thoughtfully. "It's a one-man job. We'll have our chance later." He turned on Hilary. "But if anything does happen to you, you understand we won't stay quietly. We'll come—if you are still alive. Promise you will let us know—if you can."

"I'll promise that," Hilary agreed. "There is a way."

He got up and went out of the hut. In a few minutes he was back, holding three small flat disks enmeshed in a spray of fine wires for them to see.

"I've just removed the communication disks from our space suits. Strap them in position on your right shoulder blade, hook the wires—so—and you can talk to me or to each other over distances of one hundred miles. Underneath your clothing they cannot be seen. Should I require your assistance, I'll call, and further, I'll show you both how to run the *Vagabond,* in case. . . ." His voice trailed.

"Yes, yes, of course," Grim interposed hastily, "but you'll be here to run it when the time comes."

"Perhaps," Hilary smiled faintly. Then he leaned forward. "I've gotten a pretty good idea of what's happened on Earth since I went away, but now I need more details. Otherwise I'll run into things that will surprise me, and that might not be so—pleasant."

They told him, interrupting each other, arguing over details, Hilary interposing questions every now and then.

ABOUT a year and a half after Hilary's departure into trackless space, a huge flat diskoid came hovering to the ground near Great New York. It carried a party of Mercutians on a friendly exploration, so they said, once communication could be established between Earth linguists and themselves. They were welcomed, made much of. They seemed friendly enough. At their own request they were whirled over the Earth in Earth planes on a tour of inspection.

When they departed, with much protestation of friendship, they assured President Peabody they would return some day, they and others of their race. Just what hidden threat there was in that promise, no one on Earth realized. It was taken at face value.

Just a year later, almost to the day, the by this time familiar diskoid was seen hovering once more over Great New York. The

Mercutians were returning. The people of New York suspected nothing. No troops were rushed to the scene to repel invasion; no guns were trained on the space ship. It was just another friendly visit, and hurried preparations were commenced for a rousing welcome on their landing.

What New York did not know was that simultaneously with the appearance of the Mercutian flier over their city, a hundred others were even then hovering over the strategic capitals of the world. The first Mercutian ambassadors had put to good advantage that hurried tour of inspection.

No one was alarmed. Each capital city thought itself signally honored by the reappearance of the lone Mercutian over it. The plan was clever, the timing perfect.

At a signal flashed through the ether, things started happening.

The great diskoids, hovering high in the stratosphere, suddenly blazed into blinding light. To the dazzled onlookers below, a new sun seemed to have been born. A truncated cone of flame leaped downward. The diskoid was the apex, the spreading base all of Great New York. The sheeted brilliance enveloped the doomed city. It was a holocaust. New York became a roaring furnace. Stone and steel heated to incandescence.

The affrighted people had no chance for their lives. Like moths in a flame they died on the streets, in the ovens of their homes, in the steaming rivers into which they had thrown themselves to escape the awful heat. There were few survivors, only those who happened to be inside the giant skyscrapers, protected by many thicknesses of crystal and steel.

AS Great New York went, so went a hundred other cities. The Earth was caught unawares, but the governments, the people, responded nobly. Troops were mobilized hurriedly, preparations rushed for warfare.

But the Earthmen did not have a chance. The great sinister diskoids moved methodically over the Earth, high in the stratosphere, where the futile Earth planes could not reach them, and sent the terrible blaze of destruction down unerringly upon armies, cities, towns.

It was over soon. One after another, the Earth governments capitulated. America was the last—old Amos Peabody vowed he would rather go down to utter destruction than yield—but he was outvoted in Council. It was pure slaughter otherwise, without a chance to fight back.

At once the Mercutians set up their government. The Earth was turned into a colony. The leader of the invaders, the son of the Mercutian emperor, became Viceroy, with absolute powers. Sooner or later, it was their intention to transport the entire Mercutian race to the Earth, and make it their permanent home. Mercury was not an ideal place to live on; in the restricted area around the poles where life was possible, terrific storms alternated with furnace droughts, to which the hottest part of the Sahara was an Arctic paradise. No wonder the first Mercutian expedition had broached the subject of Earth as an easy conquest when they returned.

The Mercutians treated the Earth people as slaves. Their rule was brutal and arrogant in the extreme. The Earth people revolted, under the leadership of Amos Peabody. Weaponless, except for small hidden stores of rifles and revolvers—the Mercutians had cannily disarmed their slaves—they fought desperately with axes, knives, clubs, anything, against the overlords.

The result could have been expected. The rebellion was smothered in blood and fire. The bravest of the Earthmen died in battle, or were executed afterwards. The slaves, the weaklings, were left. Old Amos Peabody was treated as Hilary had seen. He was exhibited in city after city as a public warning.

HILARY'S blood was boiling as the terrible narration went on and on. But his face was calm, immovable.

"How do the diskoids operate?" he asked.

"Something like the sun rays on the one-man fliers," Grim told him, "only vastly more powerful. They are not limited in range, for one thing. It took only one, fifty miles up in the stratosphere, to destroy all New York. I saw the one that first spied on the Earth. It was about five hundred feet in diameter, made of the same vitreous material, and shaped like a huge lens. No doubt, besides being a space ship, it is just that. The sun's light flashes through it, is rearranged into terrible burning rays, and sears all in its path."

"Hm'm!" Hilary meditated. "So everything the Mercutians have in the way of weapons and armament depends directly on the sun's rays."

"Yes," Grim agreed. "After all, you must remember that with Mercury exposed as it is to the fierce heat of the sun, it would be only natural for them to develop weapons that utilized its rays."

"Then the tubes and the fliers cannot operate at night?"

"Yes, because then they receive the reflected waves from the diskoids that are stationed out in space, in eternal sunlight."

Hilary considered this a moment.

"Where do you think it possible Joan was taken?" he changed the subject abruptly.

"It is hard to say," Grim answered slowly. "But your best chance would be with the Viceroy himself. There have been rumors—when pretty girls disappear."

Hilary's jaw set hard.

"I think I'll interview His Mercutian Magnificence," he said. "Where are his quarters?"

"The Robbins Building."

"Good Lord, that's Joan's. . . ." So that was why Joan was up in the Bronxville suburb. "What happened to her father, Martin Robbins?"

"Executed after the revolt," Wat interposed. "Your girl must have escaped, otherwise she'd have been treated then like the other girls whose relatives had fought."

Hilary smiled unaccountably, the first smile since Joan had been taken. He knew the Robbins Building well; he had been a frequent visitor there in the old days. There were surprises in store for His Nibs the Mercutian. . . .

CHAPTER VI

Mutterings of Revolt

THE next morning, as dawn burst over the mountain tops, he started on his perilous mission. But no one who knew Hilary Grendon would have recognized him in the meek, shambling, slightly bent Earth slave who climbed the last rung of the rope ladder out of the hidden gorge.

He had changed his clothes for an old, space-worn suit that one of his former comrades could never have any further use for. The skilful application of wood ash and powdered charcoal to the hollows around the eyes, the pits beneath the cheekbones, gave him a gaunt, careworn appearance, suitable to an Earthman too brow-beaten to dream of defying his overlords.

Wat, who had artistically applied the make-up, viewed his han-

diwork with admiration. "You'll do," he grinned. "The way you look, even a little fellow like me would be perfectly safe in spitting upon you."

Before he went, he explained the mechanism of the *Vagabond* thoroughly to his friends. Finally they nodded; they would know how to work the controls.

There was the question of weapons. The captured sun-tube was out of the question; it could not be secreted beneath the dark-blue blouse. Hilary fondled his automatic wistfully.

"If only I had some bullets," he sighed.

"Hell, man, I know where you can get plenty," said Wat. There was a hidden cache, not far from where they were, stored against the day. There were still some brave spirits left on Earth who hoped and plotted. Wat had been one of them. Hilary's spirits rose immeasurably. With his gun loaded he could face the whole Mercutian planet.

HILARY made the return journey to Great New York in an hour. He wormed his way carefully to the nearest conveyor, and made his way openly to the express platform, secure in his disguise.

There was an air of unrest, of tension in the air. The Earth passengers no longer sat dully, apathetically, as they were whizzed along. Little groups buzzed together, excited, gesticulating.

Hilary unostentatiously joined one. There was a sudden silence as he sank quietly into his seat, glances of uneasy suspicion. But he looked thoroughly innocuous, and the chief whisperer felt emboldened to resume the thread of his interrupted discourse.

"There *are* men left on Earth," he mouthed secretively to the little circle of heads. "The Mercutians went down like animals—fifteen of them killed, I hear. The whole company of guards retreated in a hurry"—he paused for greater effect, and continued slowly and impressively—"from—three—Earthmen."

Hilary raised his head sharply. They were discussing his exploit, evidently. With exaggerations of course. That was inevitable.

"Yes, sir," the speaker proceeded, "that shows you. These damned Mercutians are not invulnerable. They can be overcome, chased off the Earth. But we've got to be men, not slaves."

High excitement shone in the surrounding faces.

"But we ain't got no weapons," a small, weak-chinned man protested.

The other spat carefully: "No weapons, huh? Man, I could show you—"

A dark silent man standing uninterestedly next to him jabbed him in the ribs. The orator gulped and stammered: "I—I mean—"

"Psst," someone hissed hurriedly, "the Mercutians."

THREE giant Mercutian guards, their sun-tubes at the ready, stumbled heavily down the aisles of the express, sagging with the pull of Earth's gravitation. Their gray, warted faces were black as thunderclouds.

They stopped before the hastily scattered group.

"You heard the orders," the hugest one barked: "no congregating of Earth slaves on the conveyors or elsewhere. Next time you disobey, I'll ray you. You understand?"

"Yes, Magnificent," the weak-chinned man muttered hurriedly.

But the little knot reformed immediately after the guards had passed on.

"Magnificents!" The first speaker spat viciously. "I'd like to wring their necks."

Hilary shifted unobtrusively to another excited cluster. There the same procedure was followed. A quiet-voiced man was talking, lauding the exploit of the three embattled Earthmen, skilfully and subtly enkindling enthusiasm, raising wholesome doubts as to the invulnerability of the hated Mercutians.

Numerous patrols of guards stalked up and down the conveyors, arrogant, manifestly itching for a pretext to ray the conquered. But the Earthmen gave them no opportunity. The groups melted at their approach into meek, vacuous individuals; reformed instantly as they moved on. And there were no informers. The Earthmen had resumed their almost forgotten Earth solidarity in fronting the invaders.

HILARY watched the restless shifting groups with a glow of pride. This was his work, the spark he had kindled was being fanned into a steady blaze. These whisperers, these exhorters, who were they? Members of an underground organization? Possibly. Wat and Grim had both belonged to loose circles, vague and shifting in membership. Possibly they were coalescing now, joining up into a world-wide organization. He hoped so. It would make his task easier, it also helped restore his pride in being an Earthman. He had almost thought that this supine listless race of his was not worth rescuing.

He reached the terminal in Great New York without untoward incident. No one challenged this meek, shabby-looking Earthman. The Mercutians gave him barely a glance; the Earthmen disregarded him when they whispered together. Hilary was content; he was not seeking undue notice.

The terminal was the scene of unwonted activity. The conveyors were disgorging crowds of Earthmen, grim, determined-looking individuals. They scattered purposefully through the various exits of the huge building. Hilary noted with interest that there were no women, no children, on the constantly incoming expresses.

The Mercutians were massing, too. The terminal was crowded with guards. They stalked heavily about, shouldering their Earth slaves rudely out of the way, sending them sprawling with sudden quick shoves. It would take only an untoward word, a false movement, to start a massacre. The Mercutians were deliberately trying to egg them on.

But the Earthmen took the abuse, the physical violence, quietly. They picked themselves up, disappeared through the exits, giving way to new arrivals. Once Hilary caught a gleam of familiar steel in the unbuttoned recess of a man's blouse pocket. He smiled. There were untoward events impending.

But first he must take care of his own private matter. Joan was a captive in the hands of the Mercutian Viceroy. What was his name? Wat had told him. That was it—Artok.

HE was out in the street now, a wide vita-crystal paved thoroughfare, one of the many that radiated from the terminal like the spokes of a wheel. On either side was an upflung spray of tall receding towers, dazzling in the sunshine.

It struck Hilary suddenly. There had been bright unclouded skies during the days since his arrival. Only at night had it rained, like clockwork; every night for fifteen minutes immediately after midnight. A light steady shower that ceased as suddenly as it sprang up.

It was unusual. This was April in the Spring of 2348 and April was always a month of showery heavens. Had the Mercutians, accustomed to the blazing light of their own planet, deliberately managed some way to create perpetual sunshine on Earth? Very likely, considering the clockwork night showers, no doubt for the purpose of preventing droughts. There was the matter of weapons and power, too. They all depended on the sun.

Hilary took the inside moving platform. It would take him to the Robbins Building. The street was black with people, surging back and forth, restless, ominous.

Mercutians stalked purposefully along, in companies of ten. Their guttural voices were harsh with command. The Earthmen scattered out of their way. Those who were not nimble enough were knocked down, trampled underfoot.

One Earthman, braver than the rest, or more foolish, gave vent to a scream of rage, when a young girl, with whom he was arm in arm, was wrested brutally away. His fist shot out, caught the leering guard flush on his chin.

The Mercutian staggered, then bellowed with rage. His tube flashed upward. The Earthman's eyes opened wide as with wonder, then he collapsed, cut cleanly in half.

There was a full-throated growl from the jammed thoroughfare, a sudden surging forward. But the guards, reinforced by others, had their tubes lifted, ominous, death-dealing. The crowd ebbed back hastily.

HILARY had joined the first rush. His blood pounded in his veins at the unprovoked brutality. For a hasty moment he visioned the commencement of the revolt. But as the mob retreated before the weapons, his brain cooled. The time was not ripe yet. It would be pure slaughter. Besides, there was Joan.

Once more he was the meek, downtrodden slave. He got off the platform, shambled over to the Robbins Building, an imposing pile of vita-crystal. It rose high into the air, overtopping even the great Memorial Tower. Martin Robbins had been wealthy, very much so. He had been a physicist of world repute, and this building was a monument to his inventive genius. The top floors were devoted to marvelously equipped laboratories. On the roof were the living quarters—dwelling of many rooms surrounded by an alpine garden. All Great New York stretched beneath. In the distance the green waters of the Atlantic dazzled in the sunshine.

Hilary knew the layout well. It had been his second home before. . . . He put the bitter thoughts determinedly behind him. There was work ahead. The stooped, hollow-cheeked creature shambled aimlessly up to the entrance. It was filled with Mercutian guards.

He edged his way along, hoping to pass through unnoticed.

"Here, you," a burly Mercutian barred his way, "get out of here before I ray you."

HILARY seemed to shrivel together in mortal terror. He turned to slink out again. The guard had him by the shoulder, was propelling him with ungentle paws toward the exit. Hilary let himself be shoved.

A cold curt voice spoke a sharp command:

"What have you there?"

Where had Hilary heard that voice before?

The pushing guard spun him around hastily.

"He was trying to get into the building, Cor Urga," he said respectfully. "These damned Earth

slaves are everywhere under foot. It's time we rayed a few to teach them a lesson."

Hilary found himself gazing at the gray saturnine countenance that had burnt itself into his memory. Urga—the Mercutian who had kidnaped Joan! His muscles tensed suddenly for a quick spring, then relaxed. He must play the game.

Urga looked him over carefully, puzzled.

"Strange," he grunted, "I've seen this fellow before, but I cannot remember where."

Hilary was taut. Would he be recognized?

But the Mercutian Cor—in Earth terms, Captain of a Hundred—shook his head finally, and turned away. The disguise had held up.

"All these Earth slaves look alike. This one is a particularly poor specimen. Turn him loose. If he tries to come in again, kill him."

"Get," the guard growled viciously, and sent Hilary sprawling out into the street to the muttering accompaniment of the seething Earth crowds. The temper of the people was rapidly reaching the explosion point.

BUT Hilary picked himself up, meekly, brushed himself off, and melted unostentatiously into the moving crowd. He desired no undue attention.

Strangely enough, there were no Mercutians in sight. Only the surging, growling Earthmen. Hilary felt their mysterious disappearance to be ominous—as though they had been warned by some secret signal. Something terrible was about to happen. He must get to that certain passageway he knew, and quickly. If only it were not guarded.

A cry went up about him, a yell of many voices.

"The Mercutians are coming."

Hilary whirled. Down the street, issuing from the terminal, deployed a full regiment of guards, bowed under the strong pull of the Earth, but formidable enough. Sun-tubes glinted dangerously. A stentorian voice reached him. "Clear the streets, you Earth dogs," it roared. "You've been warned enough. One minute to obey and I'll burn you all down."

A babel of excited voices went up. The crowds farther down, near the advancing Mercutians, melted into a wild scramble. Men trampled each other underfoot in a mad attempt to reach safety before the minute's expiration.

Where Hilary had paused, there was a milling indecisiveness. Men were already quietly edging their way toward adjoining buildings, into side thoroughfares; others were more belligerent.

"Kill the bloody beasts!" a man suddenly screamed near Hilary, drawing a pistol from beneath his blouse. He waved it frantically in the air. There was an ugly surge, a low-throated growl. It needed very little for the mob to get out of hand and hurl itself upon the steadily approaching Mercutian regiment.

Hilary acted swiftly. He caught the man's pistol arm, thrust it down sharply out of sight. A quick wrench, and the gun was in his own hand. The man, wild-eyed, opened his mouth to shout.

"Shut up," Hilary hissed fiercely. "Are you mad? You wouldn't have a chance. They'd ray us all clean out of existence." He thrust the pistol back into the man's blouse. "Wait; our chance will come."

"Oh, my God! Look!" someone screamed.

A command shattered the air; the tubes of the Mercutians uplifted; a blinding sheet of flame blazed solidly down the street. The minute's grace was up.

EVEN at this distance, the heat scorched and seared. There were many unfortunates caught farther down, men who had had no chance to seek safety in time. They melted in the furnace blast as though they were bits of metal in an electric arc.

"Run for your lives!" the shout went up. All thought of resistance was gone. It was every one for himself. The man with the gun was the first to run. Hilary found himself caught in the mad rush. The Mercutians were pounding along methodically raying in front of them.

Hilary was thrust into a little eddy of men to one side. It swirled and shoved. The entrance of the Pullman Building loomed ahead. The sight of it gave Hilary new vigor. That was his destination. If only he could make it.

He straightened out of his stoop, squared his shoulders. The next instant a human battering ram crashed through the swirling, yelling mob. Head down, right shoulder and elbow working in unison, a path magically opened where no path had been before. Every second was precious now. The heat of the tubes was engulfing him in waves, raising little blisters on the unprotected skin.

Hilary plunged into the open entrance of the Pullman Building. It was packed with humanity, struggling for the lift platforms, to take them to the upper stories, out of reach of the awful rays. Hilary was thankful for that. His destination was beneath, in the sub-levels. A moving escalator led downward. It was deserted.

A fierce, wild screaming arose outside, screams that gurgled and died horribly. Hilary felt sick inside. The full blast of the rays had reached the milling crowd. It would be a hideous and merciless slaughter.

HILARY'S gray eyes burned, his lips set in a straight, hard line. The beasts would pay for this. He shot down the escalator at full speed. A spray of passageways met him. He did not hesitate. He chose the one farthest to the left and dashed along its winding length until he came to a dead end. The vita-crystal gleamed blankly back at him.

But Hilary knew what he was doing. Long ago Martin Robbins had told him of the secret connection between the two adjoining buildings. A passageway that led between the outer and inner shells of crystal walls; lifts that shot smoothly to the laboratories and pent-apartments on the roofs of the two structures. For Simeon Pullman had been a close friend of Robbins; a fellow physicist, in fact. They interchanged theories, results of experiments, and found this swift connection most convenient.

Both men were dead now—Pullman as the result of a premature explosion, and Robbins, executed by the Mercutians. But the secret passageway remained.

Hilary pressed the secret spring he knew of. A gleaming oblong of crystal slid silently open. He went in without hesitation and the slide closed with a little whir behind him.

A low tunnel confronted him, just barely high enough for him to move without stooping. The walls here were of burnished metal, glowing with impregnated cold-light. It was empty, silent. Evidently it had been undisturbed for years. The Mercutians had not discovered this secret way then.

THE tunnel slanted downward for several hundred yards, then turned sharply upward until a vita-crystal wall barred the way. Hilary could hear vague sounds

from the other side. He was in the Robbins Building. He turned to the left, where a shaft stretched upward, completely enclosed by crystal walls. A thin oblong edging showed the platform beneath. He stepped on it, hesitated for a moment. There were two control buttons; one that stopped the lift in the laboratory, the other in the sleeping room that once was Martin Robbins'.

Hilary decided in favor of the penthouse; there was less chance of a present occupant of the room. If there was—he shrugged his shoulders and loosened the automatic in his blouse. He pressed the button.

The platform shot smoothly upward, up, up, thrusting a thousand feet up. At length it came to a gliding halt. Hilary knew he was on the roof now, in the interior of the wall making one side of the sleep-apartment. The vita-crystal gleamed mockingly opaque at him. If only he could see through; if only he had a Mercutian search beam now. Was there someone in the room on the other side of the wall? He strained his ears to listen, but the crystal was pretty much sound-proof.

Very quietly Hilary drew his gun, broke it, examined the chamber. The six bullets lay snug. He snapped it back in position, held the automatic butt against his side, reached over and pressed the release button.

THE slide whirred open. Hilary waited a second, tense, ready to shoot at the slightest sound. His eyes bored through the oblong. Nothing was in sight except the luxurious furnishings he remembered so well; nothing stirred. But his vision was limited to that part of the room framed by the slide. With infinite caution he peered out, his searching gaze flicking swiftly around the sleep-apartment. It was a man's room with built-in divans, automatic sleep-spray, wall rack to hold illuminated book sheets, magnified so as to be read comfortably from a reclining position on the divan—in short, the usual ordered luxuries of a well-furnished sleep-room.

It was empty—but the divan was touseled, certain small things disarranged. Someone used this room. Hilary stepped out, leaving the slide behind him open in case of an enforced retreat. He paused to think. Where could Joan be held prisoner—if, and it was a big if—she were really here. He ran over the possibilities.

The laboratories were out of the question. The great master room then. No doubt Artok, the Viceroy, had installed himself there. It was regally magnificent. That might repay a visit. A bold scheme flashed across his mind. Seize Artok himself, abduct him into the secret passage, and compel him to disclose Joan's whereabouts, give her up. Hilary smiled grimly. Sheerly suicidal, yes, but he was desperate now, and there seemed no other way.

Gun shifted back into his blouse, with his right hand thrust in, on the butt, he glided softly out of the chamber. No one was in sight. The passageway seemed oddly deserted. Possibly the staff had been attracted to the outer rim of the terrace by the commotion below.

At the end of the passageway, facing him, was the master room. Another swift look about, and Hilary was moving down the long corridor, close to the wall, his footfalls deadened by the soft composition rug.

Slowly, very slowly, he pressed the button to release the slide. It slid open at a barely perceptible rate. As the slender crack widened,

Hilary looked in, taking care to keep his body to one side.

CHAPTER VII

In the Hands of the Mercutians

A MERCUTIAN was lolling in a reclining chair, his gray warty face turned half away from Hilary. He was rather undersized for a Mercutian, standing not more than seven feet, and his gray unwieldy body was heavy and gross as though thickened with good living and debauch. A fleshy three-fingered hand was pounding vehemently on the arm of the chair. His guttural roughened voice came clearly to the listener. He was talking to someone, unseen from the angle of the slowly widening slit. He was annoyed.

"For the last time I give you the opportunity," the Mercutian howled —in English. "If you refuse I turn you over to Urga; he wants you."

The crack in the door had widened perceptibly. Hilary's heart gave a tremendous leap. Disclosed to his vision was a figure standing opposite the Mercutian, slim, defiant, proud—Joan.

What unimaginable luck! The automatic leaped like a live thing into his hand. He crouched, the blood pounding in his temples, waiting for the slide to come completely open. He dared not reach over for the button control to shift the speed; the movement might be heard inside.

The path was clear now. Overpower the Mercutian, escape with Joan down the deserted corridors back to the secret passageway, emerge below, return to their hideout in the Ramapos and plan for revolt. It was all as simple as that.

"WE must have these Earth slaves," the Mercutian continued, unheeding. "They must be made an example of. They are responsible for the unrest. They have killed Magnificents; and the Earth fools think they can do the same. They will find out their error soon enough. But as long as those three live, so long will the slaves hope, and plot."

"I cannot tell you anything about them," Joan said monotonously. It was evident that this was not the first time she had said so.

"Yes you can," the Mercutian said as softly as his gutturals would permit. "There is one in particular you know a great deal about. Urga told me. A long-lost lover, no?" His gray-ridged countenance contorted into a thick disgusting leer.

"There is something mysterious about him. He has no identification tag; he releases Peabody; seems not to know the penalties. He has a pistol, a forbidden weapon; he dares to kill a Magnificent; he eggs on two others, ordinary Earth slaves, to join him; he disappears out of sight, in spite of all search." He was shouting now, pounding the chair arm with complete loss of dignity. "Who is he, where does he come from, where did he go? Answer me?"

The girl faced him boldly.

"You are afraid of him, Viceroy," she challenged. "You fear his example. He has shown what a brave man can do; the Earth people will follow him. The Mercutians are not invulnerable."

"Yes," the Viceroy said heavily. He was talking more to himself. Then he realized his mistake. "No, of course not," he growled hurriedly. "Enough of this. You tell me what I want to know or I call Urga in."

Joan's face went white, but she faced him unflinchingly.

"I do not know where he is, and if I did, I would not tell you."

"Very well then." The Viceroy leaned over to the table.

The slide was completely open now.

"I wouldn't call anyone if I were you."

THE Viceroy whirled in his chair at the sound of the calm Earth voice, calm yet deadly in its implications. He found himself staring into the stubby opening of an Earth automatic, a forbidden weapon. The hand that held it was steady, and the gray eyes that bored into his were hard as pebbles.

There was a smothered gasp from Joan. "Hilary."

"Yes; come to take you away." He spoke swiftly. "We have no time to waste, Joan. Is there any binding material in the room?"

"I—I believe there is. Dad always kept odds and ends in the store chest near the bookshelves."

"Go and get it then. We'll truss up his most Mercutian Magnificence— No you don't," Hilary said harshly; "keep your hands in front of you and don't move."

The Viceroy was stealthily reaching for the sun-tube dangling from his belt. He jerked his hand back, a cold sweat beading his forehead. Hilary's finger had compressed on the trigger; the slightest extra pressure meant flaming death.

"That's better," Hilary approved.

"You shall pay for this," howled the Mercutian, finding voice again. "You shall suffer a hundred deaths in one."

"Softly," Hilary grinned. "Just a little while ago you were very anxious to meet me. Now that I'm here you don't seem overmuch pleased." Joan was rummaging frantically in the open chest.

The Viceroy started, his unlidded pink eyes opened wider. But he was careful to keep his hands in plain view.

"You are the Earth dog who killed the Magnificents."

"I wouldn't call names," Hilary advised. "It might be unhealthy. But I am that very individual. And I trust"—he bowed mockingly—"to have more notches on my gun before I am through."

"You—you—shall be taken to Mercury. My father has special places for such as you." Joan was coming now swiftly with lengths of wire, soft thick material for swathing.

"Get me there first," Hilary said indifferently. "Gag him, Joan, so he can't open his ugly mouth any more. Then tie him up, well."

Joan thrust the gag into the thick gash of a mouth, choking off a torrent of imprecations in the guttural Mercutian tongue. Then she proceeded to truss him, expertly, efficiently.

"Good job," Hilary approved. "Now with your kind permission, Most Viceregal Magnificence, we shall go." He bowed mockingly. "Come, Joan."

"Not so fast, Earth slave." A cold saturnine voice resounded like the clang of doom behind him. He whirled, shifting his gun swiftly for a quick shot.

A little gush of heat caught his trigger hand as the index finger contracted desperately. The smarting pain tore the pistol out of his hand. It dropped to the floor, unheeded. Hilary found himself staring into the gross unpleasant face of Urga, a sun-tube trained directly at his midriff.

"THE Earth slave who tried to slink into the building," Urga said, surprised. "How did he get up here?"

"I don't know," the Viceroy said shortly, working the gag out of his mouth. "Don't stand there like a fool. Untie me." Gratitude was not among the Viceroy's virtues.

Urga's face mottled as he hastened to obey. When Artok stood

finally released, he glared heavily at Hilary and Joan. Then slowly a smile broke over his warty features, a smile that boded unutterable things. Hilary waited quietly, ready to seize the slightest opening; Joan pressed wide-eyed against his shoulder.

"Know this Earth dog?" the Viceroy jerked at Hilary.

Urga's glance was puzzled. "I told you I threw him out of the entrance, but even then I felt I had seen him before."

"You have, Cor Urga," the ruler laughed shortly. "This is the one who is responsible for the mutterings of the slaves. He slew your comrade, Gornu."

The captain started, peered into his captive's unflinching countenance.

"He's disguised!" he cried. "Let me kill him, Magnificent." He fingered his sun-tube significantly.

The Viceroy was in high good humor now.

"Not so fast. You would let him off too easy. I have a better scheme. We shall show the mutinous dogs how we treat those who revolt against our will."

A cruel smile broke over Urga.

"I understand, Magnificent. Make a public warning of him like that fool Peabody. Rip out his tongue and his eyes, smash his eardrums, and ride him from city to city, in chains."

"Exactly."

Joan shuddered convulsively. "No, no," she cried aloud in her terror, "don't do that. I'll tell you everything; I'll do—"

"Joan," Hilary interrupted sharply, "not another word." His arm went around her.

She collapsed against his shoulder, sobbing.

"IT is too late for bargains now," the Viceroy shrugged indifferently. "We have the man we wanted. As for the other two, you will tell us where they are hiding anyway."

Urga turned to him expectantly.

"Your Magnificence," he urged respectfully, "you promised me the girl, if—"

"Yes, take her." The Viceroy waved a weary hand. "I don't want her; I have too many as it is."

The captain's face lit up with an unhealthy glow. He approached eagerly to seize his prize. Joan gave a little cry of dismay, and shrank closer to her lover.

Hilary tensed in every muscle. Though it meant instant death, he would not permit that towering brute to lay his clumsy paw on Joan.

Urga reached out to clasp the frightened girl. Hilary seemed to uncoil. His fist shot straight up with all the power of his body behind it. It crashed into the jutting jaw of the Mercutian like a charge of high explosive dynol. For all his height and massive strength, the giant toppled over, thudding heavily against the floor.

For the moment Hilary saw freedom ahead. The sun-tube had fallen from the nerveless fingers. He darted for it with the speed of a striking snake. Even as his fingers curled around the handle, there came a roar from the Viceroy.

"Drop it, or I'll cut you in two."

HILARY knew when he was beaten. Slowly, reluctantly, his fingers uncurled. He arose, to meet the gleaming opening of the Viceroy's weapon, and the surprised stare in back of it.

Urga got up groggily, feeling gingerly the tender point of his jaw. There was unfathomable hatred in his lidless eyes.

The Viceroy chuckled throatily.

"I never thought, Cor Urga, to have seen a puny Earthman, a mere midget, overcome a Mercutian.

Especially you, a winner of the prize of strength three times running in the arenas."

Urga flushed darkly.

"It was an unexpected blow; it caught me unawares," he said heatedly. "I'll break the slave in two."

"Try it—without your sun-tube," said Hilary laconically.

The captain made a movement toward him.

"Leave him alone," Artok cried sharply. He seemed to enjoy his captain's discomfiture. "I have other plans for him. Now go. Take the girl with you. I'll watch this presumptuous Earthling."

Urga advanced with an evil grin. Hilary thrust Joan suddenly behind him; crouched like a cat. He would go down fighting. For all his bulk, the Viceroy wheeled on his flank, raised his weapon.

"One false move, and you are dead carrion," he said coldly. His weapon was raised. Hilary was caught between two fires, exposed to the searing blasts that would issue at the slightest pressure.

Nevertheless he intended to strike. A sudden swerving jump, and he might throttle one before he would be blasted into nothingness. It would be Urga, he decided grimly. He tensed for the final desperate, suicidal spring. The two Mercutians were watching him like unsheathed hawks.

"Good-by, Joan," he whispered, and his muscles went taut.

Urga paused, his weapon came up sharply. One little pressure, and—

THERE was a commotion in the outer hall, the sound of padding feet. The four in the master room froze into immobility. Two Mercutian guards stumbled panting into the room. They came to a jerking halt, threw themselves prone upon the floor, arms outstretched in obeisance.

"May we speak, oh Magnificent?" they asked humbly.

"Say your say," the Viceroy said crossly.

They rose to their feet heavily, and one of them spoke.

"The Earth dogs are revolting. The Cors of the outlying districts report that the slaves are massing, and are marching on Great New York. They are armed with Earth weapons. The Cor of the Third District reports two men responsible—one is a giant among them, almost as tall as our own kind; and the other a puny red-haired firebrand. The Cor has tried to capture them, but they are elusive. Even the search beams cannot disclose their hiding place."

Hilary's heart gave a great bound. Grim and Wat had not waited then.

The Viceroy's face darkened with anger.

"The filthy scum," he growled; "this morning's lesson was not enough. This time I'll slay, burn, smash until there isn't a single rebel left. I'll fertilize their damned Earth with their own black blood. You, Cor Urga," he snapped, "transmit my orders to the Cors of the Hundreds. They are to mobilize their men at once, and proceed in accordance with instructions known to them as General Order One. All conveyors to be stopped except for troop movements. Every slave found with weapons, or acting suspiciously, to be slain on the spot. Flying patrols to scatter in pairs, observe for concentrations of slaves. Ray any gathering without warning. Inform Cor Algor of the *Tora* (this was the great armed diskoid of the Mercutians that had previously reduced Great New York, Hilary found out afterwards) to resume his station over the city, ready to act when I give the signal."

Even in the conflict of emotions, Hilary marveled at the unhesitat-

ing, snapped flow of orders. The Viceroy, inspite of his seeming gross lethargy, was a soldier, and an efficient one to boot.

"Yes, Magnificent." Urga bowed low, and departed, thrusting a malignant glance at Hilary.

THE Viceroy thrust off from him his bright yellow robes, wriggled his vast bulk swiftly into a close-fitting dull-gray tunic. To his belt he fastened little round knobs; the sun-tube dangled swankily at one side. He was accoutered for battle.

He seemed to have forgotten the existence of the Earthlings.

"You," he snapped to one of the waiting guards, "go to the laboratory at once; convey my strict orders to Cor Bela that the weather machine must function perfectly. There must be no slip-up—his life will answer for it."

"Yes, oh Magnificence." The guard prostrated himself once more, then departed hastily.

Vast echoes resounded in Hilary's mind. "Weather machine—weather machine," he puzzled, holding Joan the tighter. There was more to this than met the eye. He must think.

The Viceroy turned suddenly, stared at them, fingering his tube.

"I could of course have you killed at once," he thought aloud, "and have no further trouble; but then Urga would be angry." His lidless eyes rested fleetingly on Joan. "And I would lose my public warning to the few Earth dogs who will survive. If it weren't that I needed them to till the fields, and work the machines, I would not leave a single one alive."

He seemed to come to a decision. "You'll wait my return." He spoke sharply to the guard. "Bind them up, well. Thrust gags into their mouths." He grimaced. "I can taste mine yet. And remember, if they escape, just turn that sun-tube of yours on yourself. It will be pleasanter for you. Understand?"

"Yes, Magnificent."

The obsequious guard caught hold of Hilary, under the watchful tube of Artok, and proceeded with clumsy weighted fingers to tie him up. Hilary did not resist. An idea was slowly forming in his mind. Joan's turn came next.

When they were trussed so tightly that neither could move, the Viceroy smiled mockingly. "We shall meet again, Earth dogs," he said, and was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

Rescued

THE guard looked at his captives sourly, kicked viciously at Hilary to relieve his feelings. There was fighting to be had outside; Earth slaves to be tortured and slain, and he was out of it—wet nurse to a couple of prisoners.

He growled disconsolately. Through an open slide window giving out on the terrace, a confused roaring, a babel of sounds came filtering through. There was trouble below—fighting already, very likely. The Mercutian glanced back at his bound and gagged prisoners. They were immobile, helpless. He looked guiltily about. The great room was bare, silent. With almost furtive movements he opened the door leading to the terrace, stumbled out, and was leaning over the parapet, absorbed in the spectacle of Great New York below.

Instantly Hilary lifted his head, exerting to the utmost his muscles. He could just see the guard's back, strained over the side. Hilary relaxed, rolled painfully over to Joan. She stared at him wide-eyed.

If only he could make her understand. He must get the gag out of his mouth. Every moment was precious; the guard might return

momentarily. He screwed his face into tremendous contortions, wiggled his feet as much as he could, worked his jaws, trying desperately to convey his meaning.

Joan watched him puzzled; trying to follow those strange contortions. Beads of perspiration started on his brow as her face registered blank incomprehension. Just as he was giving up in despair, she grasped the idea. Her face brightened, and her shapely head nodded stiffly.

The trussed-up pair started at once to pivot around on the floor. Fortunately the composition was polished, affording little friction. With infinite pains the maneuver was completed. They lay side by side now, Joan's trim feet close to Hilary's head.

Writhing and contorting, she worked the sharp heel of her foot against the thick wad of the gag in Hilary's mouth, and pushed. It was solidly tied, but it gave a little. Encouraged, she redoubled her efforts, pushing with all the limited forcé of her bound limbs.

The yielding gag cut cruelly, the sharp heel scraped and gouged into Hilary's cheeks, but he did not mind. He was in a fever of apprehension. If only the guard's interest were held by the events below until he had accomplished what he intended!

AT last his mouth was free. The gag had been pushed over his nose. Joan rolled away. She had accomplished the task Hilary had set her, but she was still puzzled. What earthly good would it do him to talk?

She found out almost immediately. He was twisting his head, burrowing with his nose against the blouse over his right shoulder. The open tunic gave a bit, and he burrowed painfully, Joan watching with growing fascination, until one of the binding wires stopped further progress. But it seemed far enough, judging from the satisfied illumination in Hilary's eyes.

He spoke, his mouth pressed close against the shoulder blade, his tones queerly muffled, thick.

"Grim Morgan, Wat Tyler, Grim Morgan, Wat Tyler," he whispered over and over again. He could not hear if there was any response; his ears were muffled now by the spread gag. He could not help that.

"Grim Morgan, Wat Tyler," he muttered monotonously, "Hilary Grendon calling. Held prisoner with Joan, top of Robbins Building. Guarded. Urgent you free us. Artok has sent out general death orders. I have plan to stop him. Come, quickly."

Over and over he murmured the message, hoping desperately they would hear him in the communication disks strapped to their shoulders.

"Come quickly," he repeated; and then the guard, tiring of the view below, or the streets having been cleared of rebels, came softly into the room. Hilary's head jerked quickly back, the shoulder of his tunic falling back into position.

"Here, what's this?" the guard growled suspiciously, catching sight of the displaced gag. "How on Mercury did you do that?"

He knelt swiftly, thrust the gag back into position with ungentle paw, kicked the unresisting form in the side to show his displeasure, and rose. Hilary's heart pounded; the guard had not seen the inconspicuous disk under the tunic. He was in an agony of expectation. Had his comrades caught his message? Could they rescue him even if they had? Questions that only time could answer.

The guard was alert now; he did not like that queer removal of the gag. There would be no further chance to unbind themselves. What

seemed hours passed as they lay cramped, immobile.

The air grew thick and warm, or was it only his imagination? No, for the guard felt it, too. Then something buzzed, intermittently. One long, two short. It seemed to emanate from a round black button on the sleeve of his gray tunic. A signal!

THE guard exclaimed something in guttural Mercutian, rose hastily, and closed the open door and window. He pressed another button, and sheeted lead curtains rolled swiftly over the vita-crystal roof, darkening the room, cutting off the rays of diffused sunlight. Then he seated himself not far from the captives, facing them, grinning savagely. Hilary wondered why.

Again what seemed hours passed. Behind the lead curtain, the room had become definitely, uncomfortably warm. The Earthlings perspired; the atmosphere was literally steaming; and in their cramped limbs, the torture was fast becoming unbearable. Only the Mercutian guard did not seem to mind. He was accustomed to far higher temperatures on the arid planet that was his home.

Just as the prisoners were gasping almost their last gasp, the heat seemed to recede, swiftly. At once the guard rolled back the leaden shade opened the door and window again. His grin was broadly triumphant. Something clutched at Hilary's heart; he understood now. The beastly invaders! He struggled furiously at his bonds, but they did not give. He ceased his efforts, panting.

The moments passed. Hilary was giving up whatever slender hopes he had had. Wat and Grim had not heard, or if they did, they could do nothing. A slow, sullen despair enveloped him.

He was watching the guard. That gray-faced giant turned his head suddenly, jumped up as fast as his lumbering alien weight could move, snatched at his sun-tube.

"Don't move an inch, if you want to live," a deep, slow voice vibrated through the room. A well-remembered voice. Hilary would have laughed aloud his relief, but he was gagged. His comrades had not failed them.

THE guard dropped his half-raised weapon sullenly, staring at the intruders in dazed incomprehension. Hilary jerked his head around. Framed in the doorway was Grim—good old Grim—a long-barreled dynol pistol steady in his hand. From behind him there darted a little figure, red-haired, freckled, shrill with delight. An old-fashioned submachine gun, abstracted from some museum, weighed heavily under his arm.

It clattered unheeded to the floor as the bantam dived for Hilary and Joan.

"We came as fast as we could when we got your message," he crowed. "Dropped everything." His nimble fingers were making havoc of the knotted bonds, while his nimbler tongue wagged on. "Boy, we have them on the run. We'll sweep them out into space by the time we're through."

Hilary and Joan were free now. Very painfully they rose to their feet, stamping and pounding their arms to make the sluggish blood circulate again. Wat hopped about in his excitement.

"Here, you little runt," Grim's voice boomed at him, "stop jumping around, and tie up this Mercuian. We have no time to waste."

Wat groaned comically. "See how that big ox orders me around," he proclaimed, but he picked up the wire and in a trice had the guard helpless and glaring.

Hilary had recovered his speech.

"Thanks, boys," he told them simply. "I knew you'd come if it was humanly possible. But how did you manage to get through the Mercutians? The building is honeycombed with them."

MORGAN grinned. "We came in the *Vagabond,*" he said.

"What," almost yelled Hilary, "you mean—"

"That your ship is resting comfortably outside on the terrace. When little Wat here caught your message in the communication disk, we were busy organizing companies of Earthmen in the hills back of Suffern. As recruits poured in, we'd tell them off in hundreds, appoint officers, see that they had arms, or gave them directions where to find the old caches, and hustled them off. Had to shift our quarters continually, because Mercutian fliers would pick us up with their searchbeams, and start raying. Had some close shaves. But when we heard you were caught, we turned over the command to the nearest new officer, hurried to the gorge, and here we are. The *Vagabond* handled beautfully."

"I could take her myself to the Moon," Wat boasted.

"Hadn't we better be going?" Joan asked anxiously.

"There is work first to be done," Hilary answered grimly. "There's a certain weather machine in the laboratory I want to take a look at."

"Weather machine?" Grim echoed, puzzled.

"Yes. The Viceroy let something slip about it. For some reason it's very important to them that it continues to function. I'm curious."

A gasp from Joan. Surprised, the men turned to her.

"Of course," she said breathlessly. "Father had been working on it for the longest time. It was a machine to control weather. Something to do with broadcasting tremendously high voltages, ionizing the air and causing rain clouds to form, or reversing the process and scattering clouds back into thin air. This was the Master Machine. All over the Earth, at spaced distances, were smaller replicas, substations, controlled from this one. He had great hopes of furnishing equable weather to all the Earth. It was just completed, when. . . ." She trailed off.

GRIM frowned. "Very interesting, but what is so terribly important about it now?"

"You fool," Hilary exploded, "it's as important as hell. Don't you see? What are the Mercutians' weapons? Sun-tubes, sun-rays from their fliers, tremendous burning disks that are their space-ships. Sun—sun—everything they have depends upon the sun. Take away the sun, and what have they? Nothing but their hideous giant bodies—they are weaponless. Now do you see?" He fairly shouted at him.

Grim's face lit up heavily; Wat was dancing insanely.

"Get hold of the machine, reverse the process. Make it form clouds, great big woolly ones. Start a rain that'll make the Deluge look sick; forty days—a year—and we'll drown them all," Wat cried.

"Exactly," Hilary nodded. "Joan darling, you and Wat get into the *Vagabond,* and wait for us. Grim and I will take care of the laboratory."

"What?" Tyler ejaculated. "Leave me cooped up when there's a fight on. I'm coming."

"So am I," Joan was pale but determined.

"Oh, Lord," Hilary groaned. "Listen to me, please," he said patiently. "Time is precious, and I can't argue. Joan, you would only be a hindrance. I for one would be thinking more of protecting you

than fighting. As for you, Wat," he turned to the furious bantam, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to take orders. The *Vagabond* must be guarded. If we're cut off, we're through. And there's Joan."

"Well, if you want to put it that way," Wat grumbled.

"I knew you'd be sensible," Hilary said hurriedly, not giving them a chance to change their minds. "At the slightest alarm, take off. Don't try to rescue us if we don't return. The Earth cause is more important than any individual. If you get caught, too, the revolt will be leaderless; at an end."

The men shook hands gravely. Joan, white-faced, kissed Hilary passionately. "Be careful, my dear."

THEN the two men were gone, moving cautiously down the corridor with deadened footfalls. Hilary had retrieved his automatic; Grim had his more modern dynol pistol. The guard had been thrust into a corner, bound, unnoticed.

The laboratory was on the floor below. They trod carefully down the inclined ramp connecting all the floors. The corridors, the ramp, were deserted.

"All out fighting," Hilary whispered. "The revolt must be spreading."

Grim swore. "The idiots. I told them not to start anything until I returned. They'll be wiped out—they weren't ready."

Hilary nodded slowly. He thought of the strange heat while he had been captive. There would be very few Earthmen left alive in Great New York now.

They were at the foot of the ramp now. Just ahead gleamed an open slide. A pale-blue light streamed out at them; in the oblong of the interior they could see moving shapes, weirdly cut off, crossing their field of vision; bright gleaming machines, segments of tremendous tubes flooded with the pale-blue light. And over all was a constant hum, a crackling, a whining of spinning parts. The laboratory!

CHAPTER IX

The Weather Machine

THE two men flattened themselves against the wall so that they could not be seen by a casual glance from the Mercutians inside the laboratory.

"There are a lot of them," Grim whispered.

"Can't help it," Hilary answered grimly. "Have to take our chances."

"Of course," Grim said simply. There was no backing out.

Silently, with catlike tread, they inched their way forward flat against the wall, keeping out of the blue flood of illumination. The shapes, or rather segments of shapes within, moved about, engrossed in the business at hand, unaware of the creeping death.

The Earthmen had reached their stations unobserved, one on either side of the open slide. Very carefully Hilary protruded his head around the vita-crystal, and ducked back almost instantly. But his quick eye had taken in all the essential details in that momentary vision.

There were about a dozen Mercutians in the long laboratory, and each had a sun-tube dangling from his belt, ready at hand. The laboratory was crowded with apparatus, but what had drawn Hilary's attention was a gigantic gleaming metallic sphere set up prominently in the center of the room. Protruding from it at all angles were great quartz tubes, through which a blue light pulsed and flamed. It was connected by huge cables to a spark-bathed dynamo. Other cables writhed through the translucent ceiling. The weather machine!

Hilary took a firmer grip on his

automatic, nodded once to Grim. The two Earthmen stepped simultaneously through the open oblong.

"Raise your paws high and keep them up." Hilary's voice cracked like a whip through the busy confusion of the laboratory. The Mercutians, scattered as they were, whirled around from their tasks to face two deadly weapons held by two determined-looking men.

There was a chorus of strange guttural oaths, but every hand moved skyward, reluctantly.

HILARY picked out the most blasphemous sounding of the cursers, rightly deeming him the Cor in charge.

"You," he said, "what switches regulate the weather machine?"

The Mercutian Cor was a particularly ugly specimen. The gray warts were gigantic, hiding whatever semblance of manlike features there might have been beneath.

"I'll see you dogs burned to a cinder in the sun first," he growled.

"Keep them covered, Grim," Hilary said sharply. "I'll take care of this fellow personally."

He walked straight across the room for the Cor, eyes blazing, index finger on trigger. The Cor, fear staring out of his lidless eyes, backed slowly away from the approaching death. There was a hushed silence.

"I'll tell, I'll tell!" the Cor screamed, as the relentless weapon almost touched his paunchy stomach.

"I thought you would," Hilary said grimly, not for an instant relaxing the pressure against the trigger. "If you value your worthless hide, you'd better talk, and talk fast. What switch reverses the machine, to bring on rain? If you are wise, you won't try to fool me."

The wretch almost stumbled in his eagerness. "By the gray soil of Mercury I'll tell you the truth." His arm flung up, pointing. "That knob over there controls the—"

Hilary never heard the rest. There was a crash at the other end of the laboratory. One of the Mercutians, tired of keeping his arms high extended, had attempted to rest his huge bulk against a laboratory table. It went over with a splintering crash of glassware.

HILARY whirled around to face the noise. As he did so, the Cor seized his opportunity. His right arm dropped to his side, jerked up his sun-tube. Hilary heard Grim's warning cry, tried to pivot back again. But Grim beat him to it. The dynol pistol exploded sharply; the flaming pellet caught the Cor square in his side. There was a dull explosion and the Cor was torn violently into bits. He dropped, a mass of shapeless blobs.

But now hell had broken loose. The Mercutians were not cowards. At the moment of the diversion, every one of them had gone for his sun-tube. A flame streaked close to Hilary's head, shivered the opposite wall into molten fragments. He ducked behind a table and fired. A Mercutian threw up his hands, staggered and pitched forward heavily. Grim's dynol bullets whined in their passage, spattered the laboratory with flying blobs of flesh. They did terrible execution. Hilary's automatic spat its leaden hail.

But the Mercutians were entrenched now behind tables, machinery, whatever cover they could find. The beams from half a dozen sun-tubes slithered across the room, burning flaming paths through the overheated air, bringing the very walls down about them. It could not last long. Already Hilary had a nasty burn across one shoulder; there was a streak of red across Grim's forehead as he hid behind the panel of the entrance, whipping his pistol around to fire, and duck-

ing back again. There were too many of the enemy, and overwhelming reinforcements could be expected any moment. The Earthmen's position was desperate.

Through it all the great weather machine hummed and crackled; the tubes were sheets of surging flame. Hilary cursed softly. If only the Cor had completed his sentence before he died. Hilary would have chanced a sudden rush forward to reverse it, to bring on a deluge of rain and clouds, even though it meant certain death. The machine seemed to gleam at him mockingly; the hum continued with tantalizing smoothness.

"Look out," Grim's voice came to him sharply. He jerked his head back, just in time. A ray streaked past his ear like a thunderbolt. The heat from it scorched his face.

THE Mercutians were stealthily crawling nearer, pushing heavy tables in front of them as shields. He was almost outflanked now. In another minute he would be exposed.

Hilary thought rapidly. His position was untenable. He would have to run for it. A sudden dash to the door might possibly win through. But the machine! He set his teeth hard. If he could not change the weather, at least he could destroy the infernal thing, stop its grinding out perfect sunshine for the Mercutians.

He lifted his weapon. Off to one side a Mercutian arm advanced cautiously, bringing up a sun-tube. He swung on it and fired. The sun-tube clattered to the floor, and the arm jerked back, accompanied by a howl of anguish. Hilary smiled grimly, took careful aim at the metal sphere of the machine. The bullet leaped true for its mark. A little round hole showed—but nothing happened. The infernal machine hummed softly as ever.

He cursed, fired again. Another round hole, and that was all. With increasing viciousness he turned his aim on the quartz tubes, pierced them through and through. Before his very eyes, the quartz seemed to run and melt around the holes, to seal them tight as if he had never shot. The blue flames leaped and surged mockingly. The Mercutians were jeering now; raucous calls went up.

HILARY felt a sinking despair. He had failed; would have to run for it now. Small chance to make it, too. Then he heard Grim's deep bass. "Hold it a moment," he said as if he had read his thoughts.

Fascinated, Hilary saw the giant's pistol slowly thrust its long barrel around the edge of the crystal slide. A half dozen rays leaped viciously for it. But a flaming pellet streaked out of its orifice before it was jerked back.

Hilary could see its red path as it struck the sphere of the machine. The next instant there was a dull explosion and the whole machine disintegrated into a smother of flying fragments. The expanding dynol had done the trick where lead had failed. There would be no more weather control.

But Hilary did not pause to see the finish. Even as the machine burst, he was running across the room, bending low. Fragments whizzed by him at a fearful clip; rays crisscrossed all about him.

But somehow he was through. Grim's finger was on the slide button. It closed with a snap behind him, cutting off the pursuing howls of rage.

Silently the two men darted up the ramp to the pent-apartment, dashed into the master bedroom. The Mercutian guard, whom they had left securely bound, was gone. The Earthmen looked at each other, a great fear in their eyes. In one

bound Hilary was at the door slide, thrusting it open. He tore out upon the open terrace, Grim right behind him.

THEY looked wildly about. The terrace was empty. There was no sign of the *Vagabond,* or of Joan and Wat. High overhead hovered a great burnished diskoid. Long streamlined Mercutian fliers darted through the air, but nowhere was there a sign of the familiar sphere.

Hilary gripped his companion's arm. "They've been captured, Grim," he choked.

"Nonsense," the giant said gruffly, to hide his own misgivings. "They just took alarm at something and winged off."

"But where is the guard then?"

Grim shook his head. He could not answer that. Despair overwhelmed Hilary. After all he had gone through, to have Joan snatched away from him at the moment of success. It was terrible. Wat too, that freckled-faced bantam.

"I should never have left them alone," he accused himself remorsefully.

"Here," said Grim sharply, "none of that. You did exactly the proper thing. We'll find them yet."

It was a confidence that he did not feel. There was the noise of padding feet up the ramp. The Mercutians were coming, in force.

Grim gripped Hilary by the shoulder, shook him vigorously. "They're coming. We're trapped."

Grendon snapped out of the lethargy into which he had sunk, face drawn and gray.

"No. There is a way. Follow me."

The first of the Mercutians pounded heavily into the room when Hilary had thrust Grim into the secret lift. He whirled and fired. The Mercutian coughed and fell forward. Other gray warty faces, furious, thrust from behind their dying comrade. But Hilary was in the lift, pressing the button for full speed down. A darting ray showered them with rounded smoking bits of vita-crystal, but they were dropping headlong through the building.

TEN minutes later they emerged cautiously from the entrance to the Pullman Building. It was deserted, deathly still. The two Earthmen stopped short, horror-struck at what they saw.

The streets were shambles. Hundreds of bodies lay sprawled in tumbling twisted heaps. Earthmen all, with here and there the grotesque huge bulk of a Mercutian who had failed to hear the warning signal. The bodies were scorched, blackened. Raw agony appeared on contorted desperate faces. It was not good to look upon.

"Wh-what has happened?" Grim gasped, his breath coming heavily.

"Just a little pleasantry of the Mercutians," Hilary said bitterly. He looked upward. High overhead hovered a gigantic shape, motionless.

Its great disk, burnished and dazzling in the cloudless sky, seemed to cast a sinister shadow over the city it had destroyed a second time.

"There's the toy that did it," said Hilary. "I felt the heat while I was a captive up in the Robbins Building. You must have flown over after, and missed it."

Grim shook a great brawny fist aloft. His deceptively mild eyes were hard flames now. His face was set in great strong ridges. Hilary had never seen him this way before.

"I'll rip every Mercutian to pieces with my bare hands—shred him into little bits." He meant it too. Hilary shuddered.

Far off down the wide thoroughfare, came the glint of weapons, the sight of massed ranks. A Mercutian

patrol was shambling along, heavy-gaited.

"Come on, Grim, let's get out of here," said Hilary.

They flattened like shadows against the wall, slunk stealthily through radiating streets. As much as possible they kept their eyes away from the sickening sights, the poor burned bodies of their fellow men. Steadily they headed for the branch local conveyors as being less likely to be under surveillance.

The Ramapos was their destination. Hilary went dully, listlessly. Joan was gone again; this time he could not possibly know where. Every step he took though, seemed to lead him farther away from her. His glazed eye searched the shining skies as he stumbled along. Not a sign anywhere of the *Vagabond.* Only the hateful swift-moving Mercutian fliers.

It was only Grim's insistence that kept him going. The secret gorge was the headquarters of the revolt, he argued. If the fools he had left in charge hadn't thrown their men recklessly on New York against his instructions to join that last foolhardy heroic attack, there was still a chance of salvaging the revolution.

CHAPTER X

Back to the Ramapos

IT was dark when they reached the first swellings of the Ramapo Range. It was dangerous to try and make their way through tangled brush and mountain trails. All night they camped on the bare ground, sleeping fitfully, cramped cold, shivering. They dared not light a fire; it would draw instant unwelcome attention.

When dawn came, they were on the move, glad to stretch their sodden limbs. Unerringly Grim homed for the invisible cleft. Nothing stirred in the forests, even the birds seemed gone. The fog had lifted, the sun blazed forth in unclouded majesty. The damp on them dried quickly.

But Grim shook his fist at the unwitting orb.

"Damn that weather machine," he growled. "Breaking it seems to have made matters worse. Even the regular midnight shower has stopped. I'd give ten years of my life for the sight of a cloud."

"It will never rain again," Hilary said wearily. "It has forgotten how."

The bright sunny sky seemed a brazen hell to the footsore Earthmen. It mocked and jeered at them with sparkling waves of warmth.

Before them was an unbroken mass of underbrush. The next instant they were on the brink of the chasm.

"They haven't found us yet," said Morgan, surveying the looped end of the rope ladder. They climbed swiftly down the swaying rungs. The rock slanted with them, turned sharply and fell sheer. Below there was a confused murmur, the sound of movement.

A voice came floating up to them, sharp, commanding.

"Stop where you are, you two. You're covered."

"It's Morgan," Grim bellowed, not pausing an instant in his descent.

The next instant he dropped lightly to the floor of the gorge. A moment later Hilary stepped beside him.

Men were crowding about Grim, clean-cut, determined-looking Earthmen. Nothing like the men he had encountered on his first trip on the express conveyor. The bottom of the gorge had all the appearance of a wartime camp.

There were at least a hundred men encamped in the narrow cleft, crowded and crowding. A tall man thrust himself forward, spare, angular.

"WELCOME, Captain Morgan," he cried. "We had given up all hopes of seeing you again."

"Hello, Waters," said Grim. "Where's Lieutenant Pemberton?"

The other looked shamefaced.

"He's gone," he muttered. "Took two hundred men with him."

Morgan's face was awful. "Disobeyed orders, did he? Where did he go?"

"To join in the attack on Great New York. Reports came in that the countryside was up in arms, moving to attack the Mercutians. I couldn't hold him. Said you were crazy, never coming back. He went, and two hundred of the boys went with him."

Grim said: "Know what happened?"

Waters shook his head. "Our radio communication went dead yesterday afternoon."

"He's dead," said Grim softly. "The others too."

A groan went up as he described swiftly the holocaust of the day before. "That was why I warned you all to wait. We can't fight them yet. But I'm forgetting. . . ." He turned to Hilary, who had remained quietly aside. "This is Hilary Grendon, your Chief. He's the man who is responsible for the revolt. I told you about him. We all take orders from him hereafter. If anyone can beat the Mercutians, here's your man."

A babel of sound burst about him like a bomb. Men patted him on the back, shook his hand, crowded him until he was almost smothered. It was a rousing reception. The kind Hilary had dreamed of on his return from his tremendous flight through space—and had not received.

For his act of revolt, unwitting as it was, had fired the imaginations of the Earth people, who in their degradation and despair had come to believe the Mercutian overlords invulnerable. It had been the little spark that touched off a far-reaching train of events. In the few days that had elapsed Hilary had become a legendary figure.

The sparkle came back to his eyes, his brain cleared of the fog of hopelessness as he took command. Joan was lost—yes—but there was the Earth to be saved.

HIS orders crackled. The little gorge became a hive of activity. With Grim and Waters as efficient assistants he soon whipped the tiny company into ordered discipline. Absurdly few to fight the Mercutians, but Hilary counseled patience. They were a nucleus merely, he told them. When the time arrived to fight in the open, the peoples of the Earth would swell their ranks.

To provide against the day, he sent scouts out to filter through the surrounding villages and towns; unarmed, to all seeming meekest of the Earthlings. They stirred the embers of revolt with muted whisperings; they found trustworthy leaders in each community to organize secretly all able-bodied men; they returned with tidings of the outside world, with food and other necessities.

Sometimes they did not return. Then others went out to take their places. It was the fortune of war. Day and night a sentinel was posted in a dugout directly under the overhanging lip of the gorge. It was his duty to warn of impending attack; above all, to rake the sky ceaselessly with a crudely-contrived periscope for signs of gathering clouds, be they no bigger than a handsbreadth.

But the heavens were a brass blaze by day and a glittering mask of stars by night. Weather machine or none, in truth it seemed that it had forgotten to rain.

HILARY was hard put to it to restrain the impatience of his men. Reports drifted in from the scouts. The premature revolt had been crushed in blood and agony New York was deserted except for the Mercutians. The country round had been ruthlessly rayed; not only had the armed bands of Earthmen been ferreted out and destroyed, but peaceful communities had been wantonly burned into the ground.

Strong reinforcements had been rushed to the Great New York territory from more peaceful sectors of the world. There were three of the terrible diskoids hovering within a radius of one hundred miles, ready to loose their hideous destruction at the slightest sign of disaffection.

But this time the spirit of the Earthmen was not broken. Their gait was springier, their glance more forthright, than heretofore. For every one knew that Hilary Grendon, the prime mover, the defier of the Mercutians, had escaped. The invaders sought him ceaselessly, offering huge rewards for knowledge of his whereabouts. But there were no traitors. Even those few who knew would suffer unimaginable tortures rather than reveal him to the enemy.

"Patience," Hilary counseled his little band. "I know it is hard; I have my own scores to even. But we could only bring disaster upon ourselves and the cause of Earth's freedom by premature action. What have we? A handful of men, poorly armed. A few pistols; only three of which can use the dynol pellets; a little ammunition. The rest of you have knives, axes, pitchforks. Poor enough weapons against the terrible rays of the Mercutians. We must wait."

Someone grumbled. "For what? Until the Mercutians finally trace our hideout and ray us out of existence?"

"We must take that chance," Hilary told him quietly. "Let it but rain, and we move at once."

"It never will," someone averred with profound conviction.

IT began to seem so as the days passed, and the sun blazed pitilessly as ever. The brief night showers had ceased completely. That seemed the only effect of the weather machine's destruction. Some of the weaker spirits among the men were for disbanding. They were afraid of eventual discovery; anxious about their families, left to the tender mercies of the outlanders. Hilary argued, dissuaded, but to no effect. They were determined to go. If by the end of the week there was no action, they said, they would leave. It was Wednesday then.

Thursday and Friday passed. No change. On Saturday a scout brought breathless tidings. One of the great diskoids had crashed to the ground from its station fifty miles up in a smother of flame and flying fragments. No one knew what had happened; the Mercutians of course threw a strict censorship about the affair.

But rumors flew on winged whisperings. Some war vessel from space had attacked the Mercutian, brought it down. More diskoids were rushed to New York; there were five now menacing the territory.

Grim looked steadily at Hilary when the news was brought to them. A momentary wild hope flared in his friend's eye that died out quickly.

"I know what you're going to say," said Hilary. "You think it is Wat Tyler and Joan, somehow escaped in the *Vagabond*."

The giant nodded slowly. "Why not?" he challenged.

"It's impossible," muttered the other. "Where could they have been all this time? Surely they would

have returned to this place. And you forget that Mercutian guard who was freed. No, my friend, they have been killed, the *Vagabond* seized, and that was the end to that."

Morgan shook his head skeptically.

SATURDAY was cloudless. Sunday morning the malcontents were to leave, to dribble back quietly to their homes. They were sullen, defiant in the face of the openly expressed scorn of the loyal men, but determined.

"No use getting ourselves killed for nothing," they muttered.

Double sentries were posted that night. A gloom hung over the camp. Hilary went to sleep heavy-hearted. This seemed the end of all his visions. Joan dead, Wat too; no hope of freeing the Earth from its slavery. If only he had the *Vagabond,* he'd take off again for the uncharted reaches of spaces, find some little habitable asteroid, live out the rest of his meaningless life there. With these gloomy thoughts he fell at last into fitful slumber.

He was awakened, hours later by a sudden uproar. The camp was in confusion. Sleepy voices tossed back and forth in inextricable babble. Hilary was on his feet in an instant, instinctively slipping his automatic into his blouse. Grim looked huge at his side, unperturbed.

"What's happened?" Hilary shouted to make himself heard.

"Don't know," grunted the other, "but we'll soon find out."

He pushed massively through the milling crowd of sleep-frightened men like a ship shouldering the waves, Hilary in his wake. One of the sentinels appeared suddenly before them.

"You," spat Hilary, "why aren't you at your post?"

The man saluted automatically and gasped.

"The Mercutians have come."

"What do you mean?" Hilary demanded, as a groan went up.

"ONE of the weak-kneed men, sir," the sentry ejaculated, "wouldn't wait until morning to make his get-away. We found him climbing out. Said it would be dangerous in broad daylight. He was in a terrible funk. We had no orders to stop anyone who wanted to leave, so we just jeered him, and let him go. My comrade leaned out to watch.

"As he hit the ground, he was bathed suddenly in light. The next instant the blackness of the night was split by a sizzling flame. It crisped the poor fellow to a cinder, and sheared the head of my comrade clean off. I caught the body, pulled it back into the dugout, but it was too late.

"I knew what had happened, sir. Some damned Mercutian flying patrol had spotted us with their search beam. I didn't wait for more, but scrambled out of the dugout as fast as I could. Up above I saw a one-man flier slanting down for me. It was a-sparkle, ready for another ray. I came down the ladder in a hurry, I tell you."

The man was panting, white-faced. Someone cried: "It's all over; they'll smother us in now."

Hilary swung around. It would take very little to start a panic.

"Stop that," he said sharply. "Now is no time to play the coward." He turned again to the sentinel.

"A one-man flier, you said?" he reflected aloud.

"Yes, sir," the other answered, "and I'll bet he's calling for help right now."

"That's just what I intend putting a stop to," said Hilary grimly. He shifted his gun to an easier drawing position, swung himself aloft on the ladder. "Take over, Grim, until I come back," he

shouted down. "If I don't, send others up to get that Mercutian."

"Come down," Grim yelled after him, alarmed. "I'll go up; you're the leader here."

"That's why it's my job. So long."

The men stared up after the tiny ascending figure, lumps in their throats. They would die gladly for Hilary Grendon now; he was proving himself. Grim fumed and waited. Hilary had disappeared above the angled bend.

CHAPTER XI

Driven from Cover

FAR overhead, Hilary climbed swiftly. He realized the seriousness of their situation. Let that Mercutian flash his message to Headquarters and there would be a swarm of fliers upon them within an hour's time. They would be caught like rats in a trap, without a chance for their lives.

He gritted his teeth and swung himself up the faster. He turned the bend. There was the dark sky above, faintly spangled with stars. The flier was not in sight. Hilary stifled an imprecation. If he had taken off, they were doomed.

He moved more cautiously now, stepping gingerly from rung to rung up the swaying ladder. The cleft widened; he was near the top. He paused. There was not the slightest sound. But Hilary was taking no chances.

With infinite slowness he raised his head over the matted underbrush that masked the entrance. For the moment he could see nothing in the pitchy blackness. Then a dim shape loomed to one side. From within it there came a tiny hum, intermittent, almost inaudible.

Hilary knew what that was: a transmitter. Even then the fatal message was winging through the ether. He did not hesitate. He lofted to the ground with one quick heave, steadied on his swaying feet as the automatic flashed into his hand.

"Throw up your hands, Mercutian," he shouted at the dimly-perceived bulk. "I have you covered." He tensed, straining his ears for any movement that might locate the hidden foe.

The tiny humming ceased abruptly. There was painful silence.

"Don't try—" Hilary commenced. He stopped, swerved his body suddenly to one side. A red glow had warned him. The hurtling ray scorched past him with a crackling blaze. Hilary was off balance, teetered, and went down with a crash into the thorny underbrush, his automatic exploding into sharp flame.

A HOARSE guttural laugh came from the flier. "Got you that time, Earth dog," the invisible Mercutian taunted. There was silence. Another bolt crashed from the ship, heaved the ground under its impact. Another and another. Still no break in the silence, no cry.

The Mercutian muttered to himself: "The dog is dead, all right." He peered out cautiously. The underbrush was black, sullenly quiet. Great swaths showed where the rays had swept the Earth. With a hoarse chuckle the grotesque giant climbed over the side of his ship. A search beam swung in his hand. He was in deep shadow. He swung the beam in a short arc. There was nothing, only matted vegetation. There was one thick thorny bush he noted, however, extending its bulk behind the bow of the ship. He stepped out a bit, away from the flier's shadow, and swung his beam directly at it. The invisible ray pierced through the interlacing twigs with ease. It picked out a prone figure, lying with arm extended.

The Mercutian chuckled again, but the chuckle changed almost immediately to a throaty cry of alarm. With a swiftness that went incongruously with his awkward bulk, his free arm dropped for his hand ray. There was a sharp burst of flame, a staccato bark. The Mercutian staggered, swayed with sullen pain-widened eyes, and pitched headlong forward.

THE prone figure in the bush leaped up, ran for him. The Mercutian was dead, drilled through the heart. Hilary sheathed his weapon grimly. His task was done. One thing, though. How much of the message had been transmitted? He must know. He vaulted over the side of the flier, fumbled around until he found the receiving apparatus. Then he waited, dreading to hear the silence broken. A minute passed, two minutes, and Hilary breathed a sigh of relief. The message had not gotten through.

Then it came—a tiny sparking, an intermittent hum. Hilary's heart sank with hammering blows. He tried to read the signals, but they were in code, or in the Mercutian tongue, which was just as bad. It was not necessary, though. Headquarters *had* heard; they *knew*.

Hilary did not waste an instant in vain regrets. Within an hour the gorge would be a vicious trap; he must get his men out at once. What then he did not know, nor bother. There was the more immediate problem.

He went down the swinging ladder hand over hand, not pausing for the rungs. Every instant was precious now. His hands scorched, but he did not feel the pain.

His flying body collided thudding with a heavy bulk beneath. There was a grunt, the rope jerked from his hands, and two bodies fell cursing, entangled, to the ground. Luckily it was not far distant. He sprang to his feet, found Grim heaving his bulk up more slowly.

"I was coming up after you," the giant growled. "You were gone too long. That's the thanks I get."

Hilary had no time for idle talk.

"Attention, men," he snapped. "We leave at once. You have five minutes to get your arms, ammunition clips and rations, light marching order."

Without a word they scattered alertly to their tasks. It was the discipline of veterans.

"You didn't get the Mercutian?" Grim was troubled.

"I got him all right," answered his leader laconically, "but too late. His message had gone through."

FIVE minutes later to the dot, the camp was lined up, accoutered complete. They were silent, tense, but smartly erect. Hilary's flash glowed over them in the dark. Then he nodded approvingly.

"Fine work, men. Up that ladder, one at a time," he said. "Each man counts twenty slowly, one—two—three before he follows. Keep your distance, and move fast."

The first man sprang to the ladder, went up swiftly. Twenty seconds later, the next man's foot was on the bottom rung. Up and up they went, one after the other, each man counting off and climbing. Hilary watched them anxiously.

"Hope we make it," he muttered to Grim. "It'll take all of forty minutes to evacuate, and the Mercutians may be on us by then."

It was almost forty minutes to the dot when Hilary's head emerged from the cleft. He was the last man out. The men were lined up on a level bit, nervous, apprehensive. In spite of the discipline, heads automatically jerked upward, raked the sky for sign of the enemy.

Where to now?—thought Hilary. There were no more hiding places

as perfect as the one they had just left. They were forced into the open, easy prey for the first lynx-eyed Mercutian. Sooner or later they would be discovered, and then. . . . A last hopeless glance at the mocking stars. Never had man yearned more for rain, oceans and oceans of it.

HILARY roused himself. Whatever of despair he felt did not appear in his staccato orders.

"We march at once, men," he said. "Scatter formation, five paces between. At the signal, take nearest cover, and prepare for action. Forward—"

"Too late." Grim's voice was flat, controlled.

Hilary looked around sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Look." Morgan's hand swept aloft. Through the darkling night, faintly visible in the feeble starlight—there was no moon—were driving shapes, a full score of them converging upon the little band.

One look was sufficient. Mercutian fliers hurrying in response to their fellow's signal. There was no time, no chance to escape.

"Very well, men," Hilary commanded, coldly calm. "Take cover. Do not fire until I give the order."

There was instant scattering. The men dived for whatever poor bit of protection they could find: jutting rocks, tree trunks, thin thorny bushes even.

Grim and Hilary crouched together behind a great boulder.

"How many pistols are there in the crowd?" Hilary asked quietly.

"Not many. Outside of your automatic and my dynol pistol, there are two other dynols and not more than a dozen automatics. If only we had the submachine gun with us, but Wat took it along, and he's gone."

"Not much chance, I'm afraid," said Hilary; "but we'll fight it out. Here they come."

The two men crouched lower. All about them was silence; not even a leaf stirred in the heavy breathlessness.

THE driving fliers were easily visible now. Ominous hurtling projectiles, coming to crush out the last vestige of revolt on the conquered planet. On they came, purposefully, directly, knowing their way; a full score, converging in a scream of wind against their bows as they dropped straight for the hidden gorge.

It seemed to the hidden watchers as though they would crash to Earth with the speed of their swoop. But at one hundred feet aloft the fliers braked their headlong flight, hovered motionlessly in echelon formation.

A moment's breathless pause—to the hiding men it seemed eternity—and all the uneven terrain, rocks, trees, bushes, the soil itself, burst into glowing white crystal clearness. The Mercutians had turned on their search beams.

Hilary gazed clear through the rock behind which he crouched as though it were a transparency. All around him he saw the prone bodies of his men, naked to the view of all and sundry.

A hoarse derisive chuckle rasped from above. Hilary sprang to his feet; further attempt at concealment was useless. As he did so, the air seemed to split in two, there was a blinding, rending crash. Not ten feet from where he stood, the ground tossed in torture. A man screamed—terribly. The first blow had been struck.

Hilary burned with a cold consuming anger. "Up, men, and fire. Aim forward, about three feet back of the prow." That was where the pilot would be.

A scattered burst of cheers an-

swered him. On all sides, like crystal ghosts, the Earthmen rose to their feet. They were fighting men.

Hilary took careful aim at a flier almost directly overhead and fired. He could have sworn he hit it, but nothing happened. Grim's dynol pistol flamed redly nearby. The tracer pellet scorched upward, impacted against the hull of a flier. There was a faint detonation, and the next instant the air was full of flying fragments.

"Got that one," he said softly.

HILARY was conscious of a faint envy. His automatic seemed like a harmless popgun against that deadly weapon. But he drew another bead and fired again. With bated breath he awaited the result. Nothing. Hilary groaned, made as if to throw the useless gun away, when the flier he had aimed at wabbled, tried to right itself, and crashed in a swift erratic loop.

By now the pitifully few weapons of the Earthmen were popping. Two more of the enemy fliers hurtled to destruction. But as at a given signal, the air above them seemed suddenly to flame destruction. With the noise of a thousand thunderbolts the massed rays struck.

The groaning Earth tossed and heaved in billowing waves to escape its torture. The trees were blazing pyres. It seemed impossible for anything that lives within that area to escape instant destruction.

Hilary felt a wave of blinding heat envelop him, and he was thrown flat to the quaking ground. Frightful cries, screams of agony, came to his dulled ears as from a great distance. He heaved himself up wearily, scorched, smoldering, but otherwise unhurt.

"GRIM," he whispered through thick cracked lips, "Grim, where are you?"

"Here." Strange how tranquil he sounded. A scarecrow of a figure arose almost at his right from a smoldering bush, a giant clothed in smoking rags. In the strange illumination of the search beams he seemed the wraith of a scarecrow.

"Thank God you're alive," Hilary croaked. "The others. . . ?"

Figures were staggering up from the holocaust about them.

Grim's practised eyes counted. "About fifty left," he said, "just one half."

Hilary's voice rose suddenly, strongly. "Keep on firing, men." Once again his pistol barked defiance.

A faint, ragged cheer answered him. A few guns flamed; there were only a handful left.

"God!" someone cried.

The massed ships above were gleaming faintly. Little shimmering sparkles ran over the hulls. They were going to ray again. Hilary went berserk, screamed strange oaths, fired again and again. Grim fired, more slowly. Two of the enemy ships left the formation, plunged headlong. But the shimmering grew brighter. In seconds the terrible bolts would be loosed. It was the end. The Earthmen knew it. They could not survive a second raying.

Grim shouted. Never before had Hilary heard him raise his voice to that pitch. His great arm was upflung. "Look!" he screamed.

CHAPTER XII

The Vagabond

HIGH up, a dark blob against the feeble starlight, something was dropping; dropping with the speed of a plummet, straight for the massed Mercutian fliers. From outer space it seemed to come, a plunging ripping meteor.

A search beam must have swung hurriedly aloft, for it flamed into

startling being; a spheroid, compact, purposeful, dropping with breathtaking velocity.

Something seemed to explode in Hilary's brain. A great cry wrenched out of his torn throat.

"The *Vagabond*."

Unbelievable, impossible. Yet he could not be mistaken. The *Vagabond* was coming home again!

By this time the Mercutians had seen it too. It meant suicide, that rushing projectile from outer space, but it would take along with it in the crash of its flight a goodly number of the Mercutian fliers. The Mercutians were no cowards, but death stared them openly in the face.

Instantly all was in confusion. Forgotten the rebellious Earthmen below, forgotten everything but escape from the down-rushing thunderbolt.

Hilary, staring upward, could visualize the fliers working desperately at their controls. The clustered ships vibrated like a school of frightened fish poised for instant flight. Then they were in motion; scattering, wabbling in the terror of their retreat.

The *Vagabond* hurtled down among them like a hawk among pigeons. Its surface glowed with the speed of its flight. To Hilary's fascinated gaze it seemed as if there would be a terrific smash. But the *Vagabond* came to a screaming, braking halt directly in the center of the milling, scattering Mercutians.

Almost simultaneously the air resounded with staccato bursts. *Ratatat-tat-a-tat.*

"Good little Wat." Grim danced insanely. "He's cutting loose the submachine gun."

Hilary woke from his amazement with a start.

"Shoot, and shoot to kill," he shouted above the turmoil. "Don't let a single one get away."

AUTOMATICS spat their leaden hail, dynol pellets flamed redly, and over all resounded the rapid drum fire of the machine gun, pouring steel-jacketed death into the confused ranks of the Mercutians.

The monster invaders had lost their heads. Even then, they could have destroyed the Earthmen with their deadly spreading rays. But the strange apparition from above had demoralized them. No one thought of fighting; flight, safety, were the only thoughts in their minds.

Flier after flier went tailspinning to horrible death while his comrades fled in all directions.

It was soon over. The greater number of the Mercutians were twisted smoldering wrecks. The few who escaped were rapidly diminishing dots in the cold starlight.

Its work finished, the rescuing space flier settled softly to the ground, in the midst of the embattled cheering Earthmen, temporarily gone insane.

The air-lock port yawned, and a slim figure darted out, straight into Hilary's outstretched arms.

"Joan!"

BEHIND her danced a small red-haired individual, his homely features grinning with delight. Under his arm swung heavily a submachine gun. He disappeared almost immediately into the vast bearlike grip of his gigantic friend. His shrill voice went on unceasingly, but strangely muffled, as Grim hugged him. Finally he extricated himself, ruffled, breathless, but still talking.

"What did I tell you, you big ox?" he shrilled. "We'll chase them off the Earth, sweep 'em out into space."

"Why, you litle gamecock," the giant observed affectionately, "I'm beginning to believe you can do it."

"We thought you had gone for good," said Hilary, holding Joan tightly to him as if he feared to lose her again. "What happened to you on the Robbins Building?"

"Can't get rid of us that easily, can he, Joan?" The little man smirked knowingly at the girl. "It was all very simple," he went on. "No sooner had you two left us than we heard the thud of a flier landing on the other end of the roof. The pilot looked out at us startled. We recognized each other simultaneously. It was our old friend—Urga."

Hilary clenched his fist. He had a good many scores to settle with the Cor.

Wat saw his action. "I did my best," he stated apologetically. "I ran for the machine gun. But by that time Urga had shot aloft again. Didn't seem as though he wanted to wait. I heard his whistle shrilling in the air. Fliers came thick as flies."

He spread his hands in a quaint gesture. "What could I do, Hilary?" his voice was appealing. "Any minute I expected to have a ray on us. I couldn't wait for you two, the *Vagabond* would have been a little pile of ashes. Besides, there was Joan. She kicked and struggled; she wanted to stay for you, but I shoved her in the ship, locked the port, and went scooting up like a rocket. You should have seen the Mercutians scatter."

FOR the first time in his life words seemed to fail him. "You —are—not—angry?" he fumbled, looking for all the world like a bedraggled dog who knows he has been in mischief.

"Angry?" Hilary fairly whooped. "What for? For saving the ship, Joan, all of us? Why, you little bit of pure gameness, you did the only sensible thing."

Wat grinned from ear to ear.

"But why," Grim interrupted, "didn't you have sense enough to come back here, instead of scaring everybody to death?"

Wat turned on him indignantly. "Sure," he squeaked, "and bring all the Mercutians along with me? No sir, I shot straight up into the stratosphere, and headed for the Canadian woods. Felt we'd be safe there."

Hilary looked at him. "I've heard," he said overcasually, "that an accident happened to one of the Mercutian diskoids. Know anything about it?"

The redhead grinned. "I was the accident. I wasn't staying cooped up in the wilderness. Joan and I decided we'd do some scouting before we came back; see what was happening over the rest of the world. We were returning from one of those little expeditions, cruising about fifty miles up, when we almost bumped into the diskoid. We saw them first; we had just come out of the shadow of the Earth; they were in the sun. I let them have it before they had a chance to turn on their rays. The bullets punctured them clean; must have let out their air. I didn't wait to see; ducked back into the shadow again."

"How did you get here in the nick of time?" asked Hilary suddenly. "A few minutes later and there would have been no rescue."

Wat looked at him in some surprise.

"Why, we got your signal, of course."

"Signal?" Hilary echoed. "I never—" Then he paused. Morgan was grinning sheepishly. "Here, what do you know about this?" he queried sharply.

THE giant's grin widened. "Just a little," he admitted. "I'd been playing around with my transmitter. Used some of the spare equipment

we had cached for the *Vagabond*, and stepped up the sending radius to a thousand miles or so."

"We received your call in the woods north of Lake Ontario," Joan interrupted.

Grim nodded, gratified. "I thought it might work," he rumbled. "You see," he explained to Hilary, "ever since I heard about that diskoid, I *knew* that the *Vagabond* was responsible. But you refused to believe it. So I worked in secret, rigging up the apparatus. Didn't want to stir up false hopes. I finished it yesterday. When we were discovered, I started sending."

"It took us just ten minutes over the hour to get here from a standing start," Wat boasted. "We almost burned up the old machine smashing through the air, didn't we Joan?"

She nodded happily from her cozy position in the crook of Hilary's arm.

Hilary looked long and steadily at his friends.

"Well—" he finally began, when someone cried out sharply.

A dark shape shot over the rim of the mountainside, swooped down at them in one fierce lunge. Involuntarily the Earthmen threw themselves flat on the ground to avoid the tremendous rush of its flight. At one hundred feet it banked sharply, a circle of light gleamed, and a long blazing streamer thrust its relentless finger at the prostrate figures of the Earthmen.

There was a blinding flash, a roar. Hilary was on his feet, bullets spitting rapidly. But already the lone Mercutian flier had completed his bank, and was zooming out of range. Hilary watched the flier grow fainter and fainter in the starlit distance. Almost he could hear the far-off hoarse chuckle of its pilot.

Then he turned to survey the damage. The Earthmen were up, growling low heartfelt curses. That one blast had been catastrophic.

THERE on the ground lay the smoking ruins of the *Vagabond*, beloved companion of his space wanderings. For a moment Hilary gave way to a deep-seated despair. This was the end of all his plannings. He had built high hopes on the *Vagabond* in his carefully laid schemes for overcoming the Mercutians. He stood as one stunned.

Someone cried: "A curse is upon us; let us scatter before it is too late!"

It acted on Hilary like a cold shower, that cry of despair.

"No," his voice resounded strong and vibrant. "We did not need the *Vagabond*. It never was part of my plans." A lie, of course, but most necessary. "That Mercutian saved me the trouble of finding a hiding place for it. Come, let us march. At dawn it rains, I *know* it will."

"You've said that every day since the weather machine was smashed," a voice cried out from the rear.

Hilary paused, thrown off his balance momentarily. Yet a second's hesitation would be fatal. It was Joan who answered for him. She sprang forward, lithe and exalted, her dark eyes flashing even in the dark.

"I'll tell you how he knows. I myself had almost forgotten. Tomorrow is exactly two weeks since the weather machine was destroyed. My father, Martin Robbins, built it. He told me then that its effects were so powerful that they lasted for two weeks, even with the machine turned off. Only positive action could bring an immediate reversal of weather conditions. *That's* how he knows."

Joan had turned the tide. The waverers turned as one man to Hilary. "Lead on! We follow!"

"Very well," he stated quietly. "We can't remain here. The Mer-

cutians will be back soon in overwhelming force, burning for revenge. We march."

To Joan, in barely audible tones: "Is that true, what you said?"

"I—I think so. I remember Dad mentioned a time limit. I think it was two weeks."

"If it isn't, we're facing a damned unpleasant prospect to-morrow," he said grimly.

CHAPTER XIII

The Last Battle

DAWN found the little band still struggling over the thick-forested mountains in a desperate attempt to avoid detection. They were footsore, weary, their clothes shredded by innumerable sharp thorns, their eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Overhead, the paling sky was already dotted with the fliers of the Mercutians; faint sounds came to them of the clumsy thrashing of enemy patrols as they beat the woods for the fugitives. The Mercutians were putting forth all their resources to seek out and destroy these irritant foci of revolt.

At length Hilary called a halt. They were in a little valley, not far from Bear Mountain. It offered some protection from the searchers. The enclosing hills would mask them from all but search beams directly overhead.

"It is no use going any farther," he said wearily. "We all need sleep and rest. Sooner or later they'll find us, no matter where we go, and then—" He shrugged his shoulders.

The weary, panting men threw themselves down upon the ground, too tired even to eat. Immediately they were in a drugged sleep. Joan was sleeping too, her face pale drawn, but like a little child's in her slumber. Hilary watched her with a sharp pang in his heart. What would the next few hours bring to her, to all of them?

Nor did Grim and Wat sleep either. The three of them squatted on their heels, silent, as the cold dawn wind swept with a great sigh through the valley.

The stars were paling now, the purple sky was enswathing itself in pearly grays. Something glowed pinkly overhead, and was extinguished almost immediately by the prevailing gray.

Hilary started violently. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Grim was drunk for lack of sleep.

Hilary was on his feet, peering upward. "I thought I saw—there, there it is again."

The other two were on their feet also, weariness forgotten, heads thrown back.

High overhead, in the overturned cup of the sky, an irregular pink wisp formed before their wondering eyes, and vanished again. But more slowly than the first time.

"Well?" asked Wat, puzzled.

"A cloud." Hilary's voice was a prayer.

"Hell," said Wat disgustedly. "If that's a cloud I'm a Mercutian. There wouldn't be enough water there to moisten a canary seed."

"And even if there were it wouldn't matter now," said Grim calmly. "We're discovered."

A LONG slim flier shot athwart the brightening sky, paused suddenly in flight as though jerked by an invisible string. The next instant the valley was illumined by a transparent glow. It enveloped the Earthmen, made crystal figurines of the most solid among them. They seemed like wraiths through which, as in a glass, more could be seen beyond. The solid ground, the rocks, were transparencies floating in an ocean of airy nothingness. A search beam!

The flier hung steady, high overhead, holding them in the dissolv-

ing area of his beam. Too high to ray them, but also too high for their futile bullets. The Mercutians no longer underrated the fighting abilities of their erstwhile slaves.

"He's sending out messages for help," observed Hilary.

"Let's take it on the run," Wat suggested.

"No good. Where could we run to that his beam couldn't follow?"

"Well, we can only die once," Wat observed cheerfully.

"And take as many Mercutians with us as we can," Grim amended. "That's one lucky thing. Their rays have no greater range than our bullets."

"Except the diskoids," said Hilary. "Here's your chance, Wat, to play with your rattle."

The red head, who had lugged the heavy machine gun all the way with him, patted its snout affectionately. "It plays the devil's tattoo," he said.

More fliers materialized in the by now brighter blue of early morning. The sun was just peeping over the serrated tops of the mountains. But still they did not attack.

"Afraid of us," Wat chuckled. "Bet they'll send to Mercury for the whole damn army before they come for us."

THE first shock was over. With the inevitable staring them in the face, the men had achieved something of a gay recklessness. Hilary found some natural recessions under overhanging masses of rocks that would afford protection from the searing power of the rays. To be effective, the fliers would have to land in the valley or fly low, thus exposing themselves to the raking fire of the Earthmen's weapons. Hilary posted his little band skilfully underneath these natural shelters in such a way that they would be able to command the bit of sky from every angle.

The men jerked and fidgeted. The heavens darkened with massed fliers, and still they came. The Mercutians were taking no chances.

"Plenty of guests at our funeral," Wat chuckled, sighting along the barrel of his gun.

Hilary left the jesting to the others. He was watching the skies intently.

Joan slipped her arm through his. "You see something that we don't. What is it?"

He nodded with an intent frown. "There are clouds forming up there. The first I've seen since I came back to this planet. Rain clouds, too, if I know anything about it. Look."

Joan tilted her head backward. Thin scuds of vapor darted across the sky, driven by the morning breeze; dissolved and reformed a little farther on. Tenuous wisps, evanescent, wraithlike. The sun shone steadily, unobscured.

"Those little things," said Joan unbelievingly. "Why, if that's all you're depending on, we're finished."

"Nevertheless they are rain clouds. But *when* the rain will come is another matter. Very likely too late."

Grim came hurriedly over from his post near the entrance to the little valley. His face was placid as ever, but his eyes were worried.

"We are being surrounded," he stated calmly.

HILARY sprang to his feet. "What do you mean?"

"Listen. Do you hear it?"

Far down the overgrown trail they had followed into the valley came the noise of heavy stumbling feet, innumerable feet.

"They are taking no chances," said Grim, his countenance unchanged.

Hilary looked swiftly around. The valley was a cul-de-sac, surrounded on three sides of its nar-

row oblong by precipitous hills. From the fourth side the Mercutians were coming—an army, from the sound of them. Overhead were a hundred fliers, and more coming. The trap was sprung!

Hilary's voice rang out. "All men without guns down the valley to repel invaders. Those with guns remain at your positions; watch the fliers. Wat Tyler in command."

With a joyous cry the Earthmen started for the narrow mouth of the valley, all without guns. Gone was the helpless feeling of before; now they could fight too. Axes, spades, pitchforks, sticks and stones even, were their weapons.

Hilary thrust his automatic into Joan's hand. "You use it, dear. I won't need it. Come on, Grim."

Morgan smiled slowly, handed over his dynol pistol without a word to a weaponless man and stalked after his leader. His great hand clutched and unclutched unconsciously. This was what he wanted, hand-to-hand fighting.

BY the time they reached the foot of the valley, the noise of the oncoming Mercutians sounded like the rumbling of thunder. Secure in their numbers there was no thought of concealment.

The Earthmen were pitifully few, only thirty of them, and wretchedly armed. Hilary disposed of them up the slope of the hill on either side, set them to loosening jutting boulders. He was in command on one slope, Grim on the other.

In a minute the Mercutians would be upon them. A simultaneous attack, no doubt; the fliers dropping low to loose their deadly rays from above as the land force attacked with their hardly less deadly hand rays.

Hilary shot a last hasty glance aloft. His heart gave a great bound. The thin insubstantial vapors of a little before had solidified, taken on a grosser leaden hue. The sky was a sullen gray, shot through intermittently with the broad flares of a sun valiantly struggling to reassert its long undisputed sway. Little flickers of lightning played around the ragged edges of the clouds.

To the most unobservant it was evident now that a storm was in the making. But might it not be too late? The sun still shone, and as long as its light pierced through, the weapons of the Mercutians held all their deadly potency.

The alien invaders sensed the urgent necessity for quick action, for the fliers were dropping now, hundreds of them, to within range. Hilary heard the shouted orders of the Mercutians Cors, the crashing forward of a mighty host, and then the front of the attack burst out of the trees in an engulfing flood of gigantic unwieldy bodies and gray warty faces.

A quick view of the stout ungainly Viceroy, Artok, another of the coldly saturnine visage of Urga in the front rank, and with a roar of gutturals, the attack was on.

DOWN from above came a myriad blinding flashes, turning the inclosed valley into an inferno of heat and rocking, boiling, shattered ground. Up the valley shot the massed hand rays of the hundreds as they swept along in close-packed trot.

It seemed as if nothing could exist in that blazing, screaming hell. Hilary, stunned, shaken, scorched, felt as if he were the only one alive. Yet as the front of the attack washed up before him, he did not hesitate. He sprang to his feet, swung the nicely hefted long-handled ax he had picked up, uttered a war whoop that went back to remote ancestors, and flung himself headlong into the boiling mass of Mercutians.

As he did so, he caught a fleeting, comforting glimpse of Grim rising to his full height on the other slope, huge hands raised, and crashing down barehanded, silent, into the ranks of the enemy. A cheer went up, a faint ragged cheer, and other figures popped up out of nowhere and dropped feet first into the fray.

Hilary found himself engulfed in a welter of figures that towered heads above him. His ax swung up and down, bit into something soft and yielding. The Mercutian screamed horribly; blood spouted from his wide-split shoulder. He fell stumbling to his knees, and Hilary stepped into the little open space. That gave him more elbow room. A furious towering monster swung his tube around in the press. Hilary ducked as the sizzling ray sped over his head. There were howls of pain as the spreading beam cut a burning swath through the packed Mercutians.

Thereafter no more tubes were raised. The quarters were too close. It was to be hand-to-hand fighting; thousands of giant Mercutians against a handful of puny Earthmen.

HILARY swung his red-dripping ax in ever-widening circles. At every swung a Mercutian tumbled. A little space opened around him, literally hewn out of living flesh. But with strange fierce cries he threw himself again and again into the wall of bodies. There and there only was salvation possible where the sun-tubes could not be used.

Far over to one side he caught glimpses of bodies in violent upheavings, bodies that thrust explosively to either side as from the sharp prow of an invisible ship. Then a great figure heaved staggering into view, bloody, gashed, great arms encircling Mercutian heads, smashing them together like eggshells, flinging them apart, seizing others. Grim Morgan, berserk with bare hands.

Here and there in his own travail Hilary sighted little foci of struggle, Earthmen with ax and pitchfork and spade battling valiantly in a sea of Mercutians. A swirl, an eddy, and all too often a sudden surge and flowing of gray warty faces, and smooth ripppleless heads where an Earthman had gone down, trampled into pulp.

Hilary's first rush with swinging flashing ax had caught the Mercutians unawares. They had relied upon their sun-tubes, and in the mêlée succeeded only in inflicting frightful havoc on their own kind. Now, however, they came for Hilary in a solid mass, huge three-fingered hands flailing, seeking to thrust him down by sheer weight of numbers. He swung and swung again, the ax bit deep, but still they came. His arm grew weary from so much slaughter, it rose more and more slowly, and then it rose no more. The bloody ax was wrenched from his nerveless fingers, and he was down, smothered by innumerable trampling bodies. Over him the tide swirled smooth. Heavy feet kicked and battered at his body, hands reached down to pluck and rip at him.

FEEBLY he tried to fend them off, but the shodden hoofs smashed him down again, gouged at his unprotected face. He struggled, but soon he would not struggle any more.

From afar came to his dimming ears below, a huge shout that shook the ground. Feet pounded him down into semi-unconsciousness; there was a mighty shuffling to and fro over him, and then the feet were gone. A huge well-remembered hand caught him, heaved him upright. It was Grim. His face

was a wreck, battered out of all semblance, but those blue mild eyes were flaming with an unholy light.

Hilary tottered, and the giant shook him.

"Wake up," he bawled; "they're coming again."

With a great effort Hilary cleared his numbed brain, saw the resurgence of the temporarily beaten herd. His fists clenched automatically.

"Good boy," Grim whooped. "Let's get them."

Then they were engulfed, fighting back to back. Hilary seemed to be fighting in a dream. He never had a clear conception of what happened. Faces thrust themselves into his own, furious, contorted; his fist went out mechanically, thudded against something soft, and the face disappeared. Hands reached plucking for him; he thrust them off, and swung left and right again.

Once he looked dully upward. The sky was gray slate now, festooned with bellying black. No sign of the sun; not the least ray could pierce. The fliers hung aimless overhead, no sparkle to their hulls. The valley was dark too; the terrible rays had ceased raking it with an inferno of heat.

JUST before he lowered his upflung face to smash his fist into another face, something wet blobbed on his forehead. A raindrop? Perhaps, but he was too far gone to care now. Life was an endless series of howling Mercutians to thrust fists into.

A cheer rose high, punctured by quick sharp explosions of sound. Guns. Those few remaining of the fighting Earthmen farther up the valley, no longer menaced by the futile fliers, had come down to help their weaponless brethren. Wat's voice was shrill in the land, yelling, exhorting, screaming. A familiar *rat-a-tat-a-tat* came down the wind. The submachine gun was spitting steel-jacketed death. Where was Joan? Hilary wondered wearily.

A face towered over him, a face he knew. Urga. The Mercutian was no longer impassive; his gray countenance was distorted with hideous hate. "I'll break you in two," he mouthed, and lunged for Hilary.

The Earthman came out of his daze at the sight of the other. Strength seemed to flow back into his weary body. His fist came up, clean with all the power that was left in him. It went home with a soul-satisfying crunch. Urga's gray gash of a mouth seemed to smear slowly over the rest of his face. A wild animal scream burst from him as he sagged. Then a swirl of other Mercutians anxious to get at the Earthman eddied him out of view.

Hilary felt better. Now he could die content. Even with their guns, what could a handful of Earthman do against the resistless, ever-coming tide of Mercutians, thousands of them?

IT was raining now, slowly at first, large scattered drops, then heavier and heavier, until the fogged air was a driving sheet of water.

What of it?—thought Hilary bitterly as he fought and slipped and stumbled in the slimy, bloody muck that was now the ground. The Mercutians' weapons were useless, but they did not need them any more. Sheer numbers would overwhelm the Earthmen.

Then to his amazement something happened. The heavens, long outraged by the artificial repression of the weather machine, kicked over all traces and opened their sluices in earnest. The sky was one vast waterfall. The elements roared and rocked; the valley was knee deep already in a spate of waters.

Hilary splashed and waded after his enemies. But they were going. They staggered and trembled in every shaking limb, heedless now of the Earthmen. They slipped and fell into the flood, and stayed there, motionless under the waters. Like Pharaoh's army they were being drowned before the amazed Earthmen's very eyes.

On their own planet it never rained; there was no water except for carefully hoarded underground lakes. This first taste of real Earth weather was too much for them. They could not withstand the driving rain, the water swirling round their knees. All the strength went out of their shaggy frames, their knees buckled and down they went, helpless, destroyed by a natural phenomenon to which they were unaccustomed. They had actually been smothered by the humidity!

Hilary's voice was strong again. With great shouts, he rallied his men. A pitiful handful; only fifteen of the fifty that had entered the valley. But Joan was alive, her face black with burned skin, otherwise unhurt. Wat's grin rose superior to a mask of raw flesh, and Grim, bleeding from a hundred wounds, was still a tower of strength.

IT was a strange sight as they stood almost waist deep in the flood, the storm beating down upon them, hundreds and hundreds of bodies floating, bumping against them.

"We must clinch our victory, men," Hilary shouted above the roar of the elements. "We must go to arouse the Earth, sweep the Mercutians into the oceans while the storm lasts, or all our work will go for naught."

A great cheer went up from the little band, and without resting, without food or sleep, they waded their way out of the valley, into civilization once more, carrying their message, arousing the peoples, gathering to themselves like a tiny snowball rolling down a mountainside, a huge swelling army of jubilant Earthmen, Earthwomen, too, moving in resistless flood down upon New York.

The rest is history. Like a torrent they swept down upon the cowed, weakened Mercutians. Those that did not escape in the great diskoids back to their own torrid, waterless planet were searched out, torn to pieces by the infuriated Earth peoples.

For five days and five nights the storm raged, all over the world. The floodgates were opened; outraged nature was taking her revenge. For five days and five nights the sun was hidden behind bucketing gray skies. And for five days and five nights, Americans, English, Chinese, Zulus, Australians, Russians, Bushmen, Argentinians, animated by a common purpose, rose gleefully and smote the invaders. When the sun finally peeped once more from behind the thick blanket of clouds, not a Mercutian remained. Few had escaped; the rest would never see Mercury again.

"WE'VE won," Joan sighed happily, after it was all over, and was able to nestle once more comfortably in Hilary's arms. "Thanks to you."

"You forget Grim Morgan and Wat Tyler, dear."

"Ye-es, they helped, too," she admitted grudgingly; "but without you, what could they have done?"

Hilary started to protest, but over her crown of shining hair, he saw Grim and Wat watching him, grinning like two monkeys. Wat's thumb was raised to his nose in an immemorial gesture.

"You're right," said Hilary defiantly. "What could they have done?"

A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

Very True

Dear Editor:

Back again, but this time with a definite purpose. This concerns the unfair, self-appointed critics.

Criticism is all right when it is sound and broad-minded, but so many knockers criticize on grounds of "impossibility." How do they know what's impossible? As Gervais said, "The word impossible is the most misused word in the English language." It is applied to many constructive theories simply because they are not understood. Astounding Stories carries new ideas, new scientific theories, new possible revelations. Time alone can prove any of them impossible of attainment.

Engineers definitely proved it impossible for man to create a machine to carry him through the air. Yet the Wright brothers did it. Jules Verne was considered insane for writing of a boat which traveled under water. Now submarines are exploring arctic seas where no other ship could penetrate. Impossible?

Without man's attempting the seemingly impossible, we would not have telephones, the telegraph, wireless, television, aviation, internal combustion engines etc. Yet all these were "impossible" a few years ago.

I enjoy reading a good, sound criticism in "The Readers' Corner," but those who censor an author because his works are impossible exasperate me terribly. That is as pleasantly as I can put it.

After all, scientific authors are humans with present-day minds. How can they be expected to write of future sciences with detailed accuracy?

If an author writes an impossible story of the future, who can prove it impossible? Who has been into the future and returned to prove its impossibility?

Astounding Stories is a Science Fiction magazine. Fiction is adventure, thrills and romance, and when added to a scientific theme we get Science Fiction. Keep it up and don't be influenced by these "impossible" knockers unless they back up their criticisms with sound thinking and proof.

A. S. authors write with imagination the seeming impossibilities of to-day which will be the accomplishments of to-morrow. They are not censored to conform with the present-day mind of man. That's why I always beat A. S. to the latest operations.—Sidney Curtiss, 1901 Argyle Rd., La Salle, Ill.

Print's O. K.

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of the A. S. ever since it started and though some stories were not up to par, 98% were very good. "Hawk Carse" was the best story I have ever read, and the sequel was better, if that is possible.

Mr. Shiver's criticism of "Hawk Carse" could be applied to many good stories which would be applied without some accomplishment which is above the average. I think his criticism is entirely erroneous.

Rough edges and big or small magazines are immaterial to me; but the print, of course, is important, and yours is just right.—Edmund Prose, Claremont, Calif.

Not Perfect

Dear Editor:

In reading the "Corner" of A. S. in March, 1932, issue, I was surprised to find a letter by a Science Fiction enthusiast who did not enjoy a lot of science in his stories. The man was Mr. Paul J. Hall. I had thought this impossible.

Mr. Hall gave us a hint to the effect that Astounding Stories was perfect. He has taken the wrong viewpoint. Anything and everything can be improved, and Astounding Stories, even if it is a super-Science Fiction mag, is open to improvement.

I would appreciate any and all correspondence from Science Fiction and science fans. I am 14 years old, and chemistry is my chief hobby.—William Palmer, 9128—33rd Ave., Kenosha, Wisc.

Well, Well, Well!

Dear Editor:

I read the letters of your loyal readers who thought that my letter in the November issue was unjust and ungrounded, and I'm downright ashamed of myself for having started such a disturbance. I agree that my letter was too critical, and that I made some awfully harsh statements. If I hurt your feeling, I assure you that it was wholly unintentional and that the letter was written with friendly intent. Gervais is right when he objects to my unfair statement that "Masaye the Mighty" was trash. Come to think it over, "Masaye" was a good yarn, and there was no very serious objection I could have based my statement on. This may seem inconsistent, but I have spent a lot of time thinking the matter over before coming to this conclusion.

And again Mr. Gervais is right when he says that we cannot be sure whether or not time-traveling is possible or whether or not we can shrink to sub-atomic size by taking a pill; but most of us have some pretty hard and fast theories upon the subject. My own are already advertised. When anyone discovers how to make a pill which will, by reducing the space between the trillions of atoms in one's body, reduce the size of a whole person, along with clothes, guns and other gadgets, to a size smaller than that of a single atom, I'll eat my shirt, shoes and hat along with several million or more of said pills and an equal number of time-machines which may have been invented in the meantime!

But then, there's something in what Mr. Absalom says. Suppose, in your way of thinking, it is impossible—why not enjoy it just the same? I have as much, or more, imagination than the next guy; I enjoy Strange Tales as much as anyone else does, so why not enjoy the impossible stories along with the others? And anyhow, how can we say that anything is impossible to future science?

I hope H. W. Blasberg will accept my most profuse expressions of sincerest regret if any serious vertebral trouble resulted from the pain in the neck which my letter seems to have given him.

The March issue of Astounding Stories is excellent—cover and all. "The Hammer of Time" is great. "The Affair of the Brains" is even better than "Hawk Carse." "Poisoned Air" is the best Dr. Bird story that has yet appeared. "Vampires of Space" is another credit to the John Hanson series. "Wandl, The Invader" is Cummings' best.

In the last few issues you have published many excellent stories. Outstanding among these are: "Marale," "The White Invaders," "Giants on the Earth," "Lost Around Rigel," "The Mind Master," "The Space Rover," "Land of the Arctic Ice" and "The Pigmy Planet." All the covers, inside illustrations, etc., have been admirable. Keep up the good work. —Carlyle J. Bennett, Charlotte, Vt.

Weird, Novice

Dear Editor:

I console myself with the thought that you answer every letter received; thus I know my letters reach you. But you do not have to answer me; I am merely blowing a thought or two your way.

I noticed the cover by Wesso, and after reading the story "Vampires of Space," I have a criticism to make. The portholes of the space ship are shown as lighted by internal light, yet each porthole is described as being sealed by a metal door. How come?

A sequel to "Hawk Carse" appears under the name of "The Affair of the Brains." It is exciting and adventurous, though its science is more remote as it describes merely the life of an adventurer and not of a scientist. However, Elliot Leithgow gives you some science, while Ka Sui gives us a lot.

Oh, before I forget it. Mr. Weaver, will you kindly step this way for a moment? Thank you. I would like to give you an around a piece of advice as anyone needed. Your drawings are attracting the entire country. Now, if you want to attract the whole world, I would advise you to take about two months off and practice drawing space ships. (I also have a book entitled "How to Draw in 20 Easy Lessons.") You are, of course, a good artist, but I believe you can become greater.—Tom R. Daniel, Box 247, Sidney, Nebr.

"Work It Out, Gentlemen"

Dear Editor:

Mr. Cummings is interesting and realistic in "Wandl, The Invader" but had better read up on rockets. His Great New Yorkers are as human and as logical as stout old Commander Hanson. Just such are the folk that should develop from the people of to-day. (Can one say more? An ex-traveling man myself, the old Commander is my own kind, a vividly human entity. So, too, the characters in "Wandl" are the stiff problems of cluttered, mechanized life, free of stylizing.

Here is a little hint for the writers of dimensional stories: four magnetic fields can be set at right angles to each other if one is rotative. Work it out.

Here's one for their consideration in optics: an equilateral-triangular prism of double refracting spar has a hemispheric indentation in the center of one face, and a beam of light is directed thereto at right angles to the plane of that space. What results? [*]—Ed.]

The filler on Einstein's unified field theory was as fine an example of condensed practical scientific information as I have seen. I put it in my scientific clipping book.

I'd like to see a story of a handsome red-headed lady pirate of space of about, say, 1950. One who uses Einstein's logical results to power her "Mote" and can use a Colt .41 "peacemaker" efficiently. Mr. Dellon could do it easily.—Leon Partridge, Box 64, Cornish, Me.

And That's That

Dear Editor:

I am writing this letter to let you know how I feel about that grading list thought up by George Ettes and Eugene Bemehel. They made some terrible blunders.

They have "Beyond the Vanishing Point" ranked as poor. They said it was too *fantastic* to be a Science Fiction story. Well, there's a lot that could be said the same way, but after all "our" mag is called Astounding Stories, and such let them be.

Hawk Carse is the best character in your mag, bar none. I agree with Bob Bryden in what he says about him. For just what reason did Mr. Shiver toss that brick at him? He evidently must have met a Hawk Carse in his travels and got the worst end of it. In almost every letter I read Carse was liked and praised, which was justly right.—Paul Dean, 223 Roxbury Dr., Clifton Forge, Va.

Them's Strong Words

Dear Editor:

"Our" magazine is almost excellent. I say almost because Dr. Bird is getting monotonous. Hawk Carse would be unbeatable with a little more scientific basis to the stories. The readers who kick about "too much science" have only an imagination without foundation. I give my vote for more science. Ah, yes! And those readers who say women are too dumb to criticize Science Fiction stories—I give them my sincerest sympathy. For I ask you, don't women make "super" beast of the ignorant[?] males? [?—Ed.] I have a few critics of "Not me!" "Not me!" Beg pardon, sir, you misunderstood me. I merely said ignorant, not all.

I am very much interested in the future of interplanetary travel, and I have quite a few facts and ideas I would like to exchange with other readers. I promise to answer any letters I may receive instantly, whether from males or females.—Everett Smith, 1319 Madison Ave., New York City.

A First Letter

Dear Editor:

Well, here goes my first letter to an editor. I have been reading Astounding Stories for eight months now and shall continue to do so in the far future.

It is a swell magazine. The cover illustrations are the best I have ever seen on any magazine. Wesso does a remarkable job; they are great. His inside pictures are very good, too. I like the also very much and the pictures are all good.

Mr. Editor, you have a very fine group of Authors who contribute to "our" magazine.

I am saving all my copies and hope to have a good library of them after a while.

When I get home the first thing I read is "The Readers' Corner." It is by far the best thing in the magazine.

You seem to have Ray Cummings writing for you constantly. That is great. I have never read a novel by him, but I read his "The White Invaders," and it was very good.

I enjoy short stories that are interesting, and you have plenty of them. Pick up the magazine: you have a very colorful cover illustration. Open it up: you have three or four short stories, a serial

and a complete novelette. All are very good. What more could anybody want?

I liked very well the following:

"The Midget from the Island," "Beyond the Dark Moon," "The Copper Cad World," "The Red Hell of Jupiter," "Hawk Carse"—an excellent story—"The White Invaders," "The Mind Master."

I think your best authors are: Wymer, Vincent, Wells, Hamilton, Brandt, Ernst, Diffin, Gilmore, Wright, Cummings, Wilson, Burks, Flagg, Williamson and Stout. —Lewis C. Duff, 5 Central Ave., Bradford, Mass.

Seein' Things

Dear Editor:

Maybe I wasn't surprised! I was riding past a magazine shop and I saw a gaily painted cover with the title of Astounding Stories. On entering the shop a few days later, I asked the price. 50c was the answer. I bought it and on perusing the contents page I saw it was an Astounding Stories Quarterly. Hot dig gity-dog! I started reading the first story. I was so interested I rode three blocks past my destination. The story was a wow! I started to read a second story—and then the alarm clock started to ring. I knew the dream was too good to be true!

Allow me to compliment you on "The Affair of the Brains." The story was a fitting sequel to the masterpiece, "Hawk Carse." The hide-out of the sinister genius Ku Sui was clever. But what happened to the brains? Were they frozen when the atmosphere escaped, or what? (You wait and see!—Ed.)

I am going to start a Science Fiction club for boys. Anyone interested please write to me. I have almost a complete collection of Astounding Stories.

I am an ardent reader of Strange Tales. I thought that "The Thief of the Sorcerer" was the best story in the fourth issue. What the cover picture of "Wolves of Darkness," third issue, was—I can't explain. The fiery green eyes of the heroine and the two wolves—phew!—I had nightmares that night!—James McCrae, 3124 Vandyke St., Phila., Pa.

Thanks Kindly, Sir

Dear Editor:

Now then, I'm a new writer, but not a new reader; I've never missed a copy.

It's a pity that you didn't finish Dr. Bird. I hope he suffers a relapse before we read of him again; and when we do read of him, I hope it's an obituary.

I think that "The Flame Flower" and "The God in the Box" are the two best stories you have published yet. "Dark Moon" and "Beyond the Dark Moon" come next, with "The Affair of the Brains" following close. However, the first Hawk Carse story wasn't anything extra.

As for the magazine, it's perfectly O.K. with me. It's the stories I'm interested in.

I want to correct Mr. Schoenick on a statement he made in his letter. He is highly mistaken when he says he thinks he —— [Censored—Ed.] something about art, for he most assuredly does not. Paul is the limitation and Wesso is the goods, and believe me he isn't damaged goods either. I'm speaking on pretty good authority myself for I've studied under several good teachers, too.

I'm wondering whether or not X. Pequeboo will solve the "egg and hen" dispute. Tsk, tsk! For shame, Editor!

And George H. Armstrong, if you do take a shot at space flying, radio me. I'll go along.

Well, I hope A. S. never runs out of a concentrated food supply, and when I say concentrated, I don't mean diluted. Mr. Editor, you can give yourself a pat on the back for running such an outstanding magazine.—Charles M. Tompkins, Walthill, Nebr.

Sequel Requested

Dear Editor:

Your recent story, "Out Around Rigel," probably the best story you have ever published, is the direct cause of my writing to the "Corner." In Garth and Durnal's conquest of time and space, why did they not select one of the nearer stars for their goal, such as Alpha Centina or 61 Cygnus instead of Rigel? If they had done this they would have gotten back to Luna inside of 8 years, at least, but then the story wouldn't have that sad, impressive end which was its big success. As this is so, why couldn't the author write a sequel to the story telling of Durnal's discovery of a record which gives the directions of how to travel in time among the ruins of the city?—Carl Johnson, 139 Campbell St., Danville, Va.

Yours Till They Do

Dear Editor:

After looking at the cover on the March issue, I am weak and wobbly. It is the best that Wesso has painted by far.

I only read "Poisoned Air" because it was in A. S. "The Affair of the Brains" was good. "Vampires of Space"—what else could you expect?—well, of course. "The Hammers of Thor" was just another down-at-the-world bunk-bunk.

Yours till space ships drink milk.—James Rinck, 4730 Kenwood Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Oh Yeah, and Oh Yeah

Dear Editor:

The March issue of Astounding Stories has in some respects better features

and in some ways, than the first issue of over two years ago. No doubt Astounding has gained countless new friends since then; but I can hardly compliment it on improvement.

In the first place, the so-called "improvements" in most cases have only gone half way. We pleaded for straight and smooth edges, you gave us straight edges but still stocking out beyond each other as before. Why not cut the edge of the mag straight down as about half of the other Clayton publications are?

Innumerable requests came in for Paul's work you gave us Paul, sometimes one illustration an issue, sometimes nine. Wesso once was good, and now he has sunk to the mediocre. Give us Paul!

The cover needs no comment. No, I wasn't going to say it's too good to praise it further—it's grown too poor to condemn it more. Astounding Stories is fast becoming a magazine of the sensational—the stories, though good, are all of the strict adventure type, and the covers scream sensationalism. Damn it, Astounding started out good—it still occasionally prints a Science Fiction story—why can't it stay that way?

Only such masters as Merritt, Lovecraft, and occasionally someone who hits on a new idea, produce Science Fiction. Nearly every author that gets his stuff in Astounding must write a thrice-filling tale that will leave you gasping (with a flavor of rays, robots, and rockets thrown in) to even receive consideration. I know the great majority who read it only for the occasional Science Fiction actually published. Most of the ideas used are so old and moth-eaten they're sickening.

"The Readers' Corner" is the best part of the mag, and, as far as I've found, is impartial. I have seen plenty of condemnations with the flowers. Still that proves nothing. I have yet to see a letter like this there before. I'll feel you're fair. Let me hand you the first bouquet in this letter: "The Readers' Corner" of this issue has positively the best letters and finest ideas of any magazine I have ever read. Please, if you want to reach a high standard, keep the "Corner" as it is. The grading of stories printed was, without a doubt, a splendid idea, and should by all means be made about every year. I think Ye Ed's grading was most fair and unbiased, but I wish I could agree with him on the general high level of the stories. (And at the same time, you printed a letter addressed from Scotland that was positively the loopiest idea of a joke I ever saw.) [I—Ed.]

It is really too bad that so many readers of Science Fiction are only reading it for the thrill it gives them. I cannot suppress a smile when I see someone ridiculing someone else for asking for more science and less gunplay or adventurous element in stories. The critic either immediately brands himself as one of a childish mind himself, who still reads for the thrill of it. The main reason I'm writing this is because I've never seen a letter yet that put it quite so strongly—perhaps because Ye Ed doesn't publish this kind? [Absolutely all wet. Furthermore, Ye Ed himself reads fiction for the "thrill" of it; and anyone who wants to say I've a "childish mind" is hereby formally challenged to mortal combat; ratten at six paces, or the running of a course in our personnelators—and may the best "baby" win.—Ed.]

Please believe me, this is an earnest plea for improvement. No matter how rotten Astounding may get, I guess I'll still be crazy enough to read it!—Lewis Hagemüller, 302 N. Washington, Farmington, Wn.

From Far Far Away

Dear Editor:

Allow me to say a few words of praise and criticism of "our" magazine. First, I want to say that A. S. is getting better with every issue. If you keep Ray Cummings' stories out of "our" mag I will be quite satisfied. He is the world's greatest writer of super-rotten, rotten stories. Nuff said!

All the stories in the September issue were very good. The one I liked best was "The God in the Box," next best "The Sargasso of Space," then "The Copper Clad World," "Devil Crystals of Aster" and "Beyond the Dark Moon."—John H. Bracey, 186 Grey St., Onehunga, Auckland, N. Z.

Art, Science and Poetry

Dear Editor:

Having never seen a letter from the "moonshine" (pardon me—"sunshine") state in A. S., I'm taking it upon myself to correct the deficiency and air my personal views.

First of all, I've a bone to pick with our friend, F. Shostick, of Buffalo, N. Y., about his statement: "Wesso is an imitation." I heartily disagree with him. Wesso is wonderful. His work is excellently shaded and tastefully arranged, and the figures well proportioned and neatly done. Mr. Shostick, I also am a student of art, with most of a course to my credit finished. We differ in schools, though. I am registered at the School of Applied Art. I've no fault to find with Paul's work. Though it is outwardly coarse and his shading unevenly worked out, there is an unknown something to all his pictures which appeals to me. I say Wesso is good; Paul is likewise.

Claude Lloyd of Missouri doesn't seem to realize that it would be a different thing to run a magazine without advertisements; but I as well as he would

like a longer "Corner." Why not add another 3 pages to the mag, and also let the authors argue over their science with the disagreeing fans? This would be information, and would help untangle readers' imaginary mistakes. How about it? [How about it, authors?] I can't pay you space rates, but you could easily build a home and decorate it with the bricks and flowers that would be hurled—walled—your way.—Ed.]

I'm nearly awed by the imaginations of some of your contributors. I fully realize how much time and energy it takes to write a story that is satisfactory. I have had two stories and a poem published myself, with the dawning knowledge that it takes more than a little to pass through the literary mill. I consider myself lucky, though a little better than 20 rejection slips are in my collection. All have been received within the last three years of my present age of 16, which is kicking the heels of 17.

One week I tried writing a science story. The attempt would have made a petrified mummy laugh.

Science has always interested me, so when I saw a story by S. P. Wright in your January, 1931, issue I said to myself, "He writes mighty fine Western stories; guess I'll try this kind by him." That was the first issue of A. S. I bought. I soon found that the other stories were worthy of high praise. Next month found me again at the newsstand, and I am now a steady reader. Since I have started reading A. S., only two stories have struck me as being better than "The Dark Side of Aaarl." They were "The Fifth Dimension Catapult," by Murray Leinster and "The Affair of the Brains," by Anthony Gilmore. "Vampires of Space" didn't toe the mark that Wright set in former stories.

How about placing the names which you print on the covers in such a place that they won't interfere with the cover illustrations?

Well, it appears that my say is finished—all but a poem written especially for the "Corner":

IN 2082

"What funds those morals were!"
Laughed a collection of TNT;
"And to think a weapon such as this
Was used in 1932!"

His gaze fell on a pistol
That fired one shots in all.
That had no option for a trigger
And fired a leaden ball.

"Now take the modern ray pistol—
That fair *fries* a thing, you know—
Now that's the proper weapon
To use against the foe.

Just think, their airships had to have
wings to fly
And they couldn't travel that black
space of the sky.

Their speed per hour was hundreds.
And it is thousands now;
They couldn't reach Mars!
Speak of dumbness, and how!"

—Henry Lewis, Jr., La Roche, S. Dak.

Not-So-Special a Privilege

Dear Editor:

I realize that it isn't nice to knock, but I'm taking special privileges as a reader who has read every issue of your magazine so far.

Why not have Dr. Bird blast Saraneff out of existence? [Maybe he will, soon. Who knows?—Ed.]

Edmond Hamilton is usually good, but his "Monsters of Mars" was terrible.

Ray Cummings and his stories are always quite boring.

Captain John Hanson and his Special Patrol stories are very good. More strength to him. Hawk Carse is excellent. Give us more stories of these two characters.—Bernard E. Schildmann, 443 E. 18th St., New York, N. Y.

Likes the "Corner"

Dear Editor:

Here I am again to pass judgment on "our" magazine. There has been no room for improvement in Astounding Stories, so I cannot report any. However, it has maintained its good quality and has furnished many an enjoyable evening for me.

"If the Sun Died" and "The Midget from the Island" were splendid narratives, and the authors are to be congratulated.

The even pages of the magazine are an improvement. Our "Corner" is a great idea and affords us a chance to become acquainted with our fellow Readers. I am glad there have been no reprints, and I hope there will be none.—Michael Rasmusen, 51 Brookwood St., East Orange, N. J.

Agreed!

Dear Editor:

The idea of rating the stories in A. S. was good but the execution was terrible. The statement that "An Extra Man" showed little of knowledge of elementary physics indicates that the authors of the statement do not understand their subject.

I haven't read all the stories listed, and a lot of that I have read I have forgotten, but I thought "An Extra Man" was a lot better than most, and read it three or four times before I lost the magazine.

I've been looking forward to more stories by Mr. Gee. His characters are

realistic and his sense of humor is very keen.—Robert Mills, Des Moines, Iowa.

What—No Whiskers?

Dear Editor:

January issue: cover good, but not astounding enough. All the stories, however, are very, very good.

February: the cover is the strangest I have seen on a magazine for a long time. All stories good.

March: at last, what a cover! And at last John Hanson got the cover picture! "The Affair of the Brains" was the best story in this issue, though all of the other stories were good.

April: the strangest and most curious cover I have ever seen on any Science Fiction magazine, barring none. "The Finding of Haldgren" was the best story, with "S. C. 20,000" a close second. I found a mistake, however, with the illustration for the latter story. The men were supposed to have long, flowing hair and beards. Who was their barber, may I ask? [Tony.—Ed.] And the Neanderthal man? They were supposed to have long, coarse hair and beards. The hair is there, but no beard. And I don't think he had sense enough to cut it off—razors were unknown. These were really small faults, however.

Astounding Stories is getting better and better with every issue. Wesso is a very good artist, but as good as he is he can't make a patch on Paul.—Oswald Train, Box 94, Barnesboro, Pa.

Yessir

Dear Editor:

After reading Diffin's "The Finding of Haldgren," I need an outlet for my enthusiasm. It is one of the best yarns I have ever read. It may not be high-brow literature, but if a lot of it doesn't rank right up with Kipling's air stories I would like to know why. Take for instance the fight between the old freighter and the patrol ship. It's simply great!

Right now I am putting in a request for more "Dark Mass" stories.—J. R. Postner, 378 Woodlawn Ave., Buffalo, N. Y.

Love Versus Killings

Dear Editor:

Have just finished reading the April issue of Astounding Stories, and every story in it was great, but please, won't you get your authors to write of something other than war?

Surely out of all the planets that your authors write about there ought to be one where love reigns supreme and war is unknown, a place where all inventions made are invented for the happiness and good of all the inhabitants and not for their destruction. How about it?

Must we always have killing? Can't we have something else? I served through one war, and believe me I saw enough of it. Perhaps that is why I would like to have a change.

Wouldn't it be great if someone would invent a repelling ray that would keep automobiles from running into one another? We would not have so many accidents then. What say? Perhaps one of your many readers can invent such a ray. [Authors take note.—Ed.]

Now about a quarterly. I cannot see for the life of me why so many are asking for one when all they have to do is to go down to the nearest newsstand and buy a copy of Strange Tales. Strange Tales is better than any quarterly because it comes out six times a year. So, now, all you quarterly fanatics who want a quarterly, just go and buy a copy of Strange Tales, and after you have read it write and let me know what you think of it. I will answer your letters, if you so desire.

I have the latest copy with me, and I am going to start reading it right away.—Fred G. Michel, 887 Milton St., Oakland, Cal.

The Sad Side

Dear Editor:—

For the last few months I have noticed your stories take hit the up-grade, with your stories becoming almost extinct. Such excellent sequels as "Wandl the Invader," by Cummings and "The Finding of Haldgren," by Diffin, in addition to many excellent short stories and novelettes have aided Astounding Stories in reaching the high position it now holds.

However, as everything has its sad side, Astounding Stories misses some very good points which, if corrected, would help the standing of your mag. You guessed it all right—I am speaking of an editorial, quarterly, and science questions and answers.

I will answer anyone who writes to me on the subject of science. [Anyone? All right; which came first, the hen or the egg?—Ed.]—Max Freed, 9815 Frankstown Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Motes in the Eye

Dear Editor:

In your latest issue there appeared a story entitled "The Finding of Haldgren." In my estimation this story sounds as though the author was under the influence of Milton's "Paradise Lost." The conditions that are found on the moon by the explorers include even the fires of hell as well as angels and devils.

In the story "The Affair of the Brains," I could not see how one brain subjected four others to its will so far that they would do its slightest bidding, especially

when the author said each had retained its individuality. Another thing that seemed improbable was that the brains knew where certain objects were placed even though they could not see. How could even a master surgeon destroy the will so completely as to confine an unprejudiced answer?

I hope I may receive letters from other fans of A. S. I am just 18, and am intensely interested in all sciences and even surgery; also police and army tactics. My hobby is the observation of the reactions of people to situations and thoughts.—C. S. Williams, 1102 Virginia Ave., S. W., Washington, D. C.

See Mr. McCrae

Dear Editor:

What's the matter with the April cover of Astounding Stories? Nothing the matter with it! It has every color on the chart: yellow, green, blue, purple red, orange, white and black. [And beige.—Ed.]

Captain S. P. Meek's story, "S. C. 10,000," was excellent from an action point of view; but otherwise—whew! It is known or believed that Neanderthals (Homo Neanderthalensis) lived in the same village with the Cro-magnons (Homo Sapiens Cromagnonensis), most likely in the relationship of master and slave, but this happened after the Cro-magnons conquered the Neanderthals. It is a matter of controversy whether the Cro-magnons did or did not have bows and arrows. Strange as it may seem, there are traces of Neanderthal blood among the West Irish and the old black breed of Scotland. Modern man descended from the Cro-magnons are believed to be a few of the Dordognians in the southern part of France along the Dordogne River.

"The Finding of Haldgren" was swell. Somehow I got the idea that it was going to be said that the moon men had reached Terra at some time and given rise to our version of the devil. Ha! Diffi hailed me.

Somehow or other "The Electric Executioner" struck me as a humorous story. I don't know why, and I don't think Kirst meant it to be humorous, but I laughed from the second page through the rest of the story. [What!!—Ed.]—James McCrae, 1004 Vaughn St., Philadelphia.

Too Late. Too Late

Dear Editor:

I found your last edition of A. S. on pacific plan. And did that cover show up! Really, I thought it was about the best one on the newsstand, and I know it was the best among the Science Fiction mags.

I am glad to hear that Starzl is going to be in your pages again; because, even though from the same town, I think his stories are great. [?—Ed.]. I can't think of a much more enthusiastic comment; maybe the old bean needs oiling.

But to comment on the mag a little, couldn't we have even edges? Surely A. S. wouldn't go in the hole on that one item. And say, how about a quarterly? I should think your cars would burn all the time. (You know the old saying, "If you're being thought about your ears will burn.") Well, I know you're being thought about plenty. And I sincerely hope they don't catch on fire. [Thanks so much for your good wishes; but you may know that I lost my ears in the very first month of my career as an editor—burnt!—and my present asbestos ones give me perfect mind-to-mike protection.—Ed.]—Basil Cudlipp, 104 First Ave., N. W., Le Mars, Iowa.

Announcement

Beginning with this issue, Astounding Stories is for a time going bi-monthly.

We are sorry to have to announce this, but recent developments in the business of magazine publication have made this step advisable.

It shouldn't be for long. We expect to skip only two, or possibly three, issues, the exact number depending on conditions which can hardly at this moment be estimated.

Meanwhile we will continue to give you the finest new Science Fiction obtainable anywhere, at any price—and we know that you, for your part, will continue to support A. S. as enthusiastically as you always have in the past.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to join in our regular discussion of stories, authors, scientific problems, and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time I may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for readers and I invite you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, queries, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so come over to The Readers' Corner and chatter to your heart's content!

—The Editor.

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